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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

March 2009

***Worship of God as Mother
Changing Perspectives on Women***

Vol. 114, No. 3

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THE ROAD TO WISDOM



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON *Awakening of Women*

Need for Growth of Women

THERE is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing.

Know for certain that absolutely nothing can be done to improve the state of things, unless there is spread of education first among the women and the masses. ... But the whole work must be done in the style of our own country. ... It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born. And you have reduced your women to something like manufacturing machines; alas, for heaven's sake, is this the outcome of your education? The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country, for India.

Nature of Indian Women

Still on this sacred soil of India, this land of Sita and Savitri, among women may be found such character, such spirit of service, such affection, compassion, contentment, and reverence, as I could not find anywhere else in the world! ... With such materials of great promise, you could not, alas, work out their uplift! You did not try to infuse the light of knowledge into them. If they get the right sort of education, they may well turn out to be the ideal women in the world.

It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings. You always criticise the women, but say what have you done for their uplift? Writing down Smritis etc., and binding them by hard rules, the men have turned the women into mere manufacturing machines! If you do not raise the women, who are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, don't think that you have any other way to rise.

Way to become great

All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future. The principal reason why your race has so much degenerated is that you have no respect for these living images of Shakti. Manu says, "Where women are respected, there the gods delight; and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught." There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. For this reason, they have to be raised first.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,
6.328; 6.491 6.493; 7.214; 7.215.



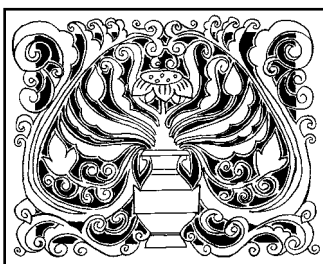
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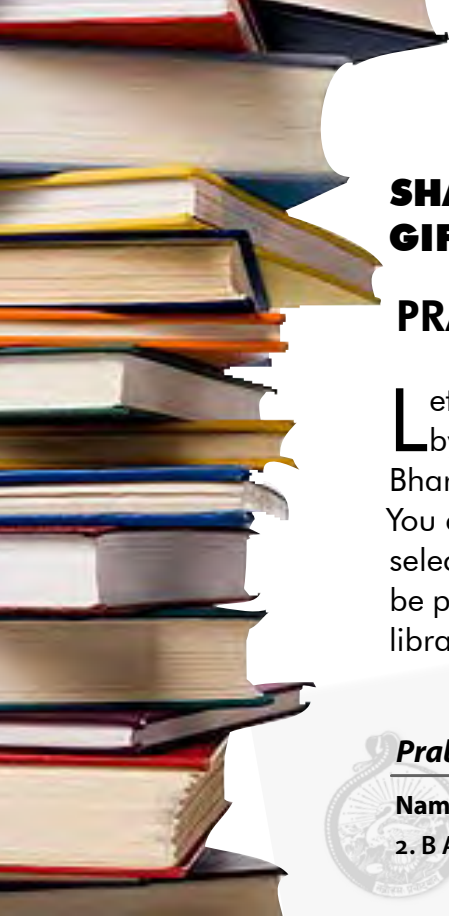
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उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Devi: The Goddess

March 2009
Vol. 114, No. 3

अदितिर्द्यौरदितिर्नन्तरिक्षमदितिर्माता स पिता स पुत्रः ।
विश्वे देवा अदितिः पञ्च जना अदितिर्जातमदितिर्जनित्वम् ॥

Aditi is heaven, Aditi is mid-space, Aditi mother, father, son. Aditi is all gods, Aditi the five classes of humans, Aditi all that has been born and shall be born. (Rig Veda, 1.89.10)

रवित्वेन भूतान्तरात्मा दधासि प्रजाः चन्द्रमस्त्वेन पुष्पासि भूयः ।
दहस्यग्निमूर्तिं वहन्त्याहुतिं वा महादेवि तेजस्त्रयं त्वत्त एव ॥

(O Mahadevi), the indweller in all objects, as the Sun you create all beings, as the Moon you again nourish them, as Fire you burn and also carry oblations (to higher realms); these three manifestations of power are born of you. (*Prapanchasara Tantra*, 11.55)

तनीयांसं पांसुं तव चरणपंकेरुहभवं
विरिञ्चिः संचिन्वन् विरचयति लोकानविकलम् ।
वह्न्येनं शौरिः कथमपि सहस्रेण शिरसां
हरः संक्षुद्यैनं भजति भसितोद्बूलनविधिम् ॥

(O Devi), gathering a minute particle of dust from your lotus feet, Brahma brings into being the universe in all its perfection; Vishnu somehow supports it with his thousand heads (in his incarnation as Seshanaga), and Shiva, having crushed it (at the time of cosmic dissolution) smears the dust all over his frame. (*Saundarya Lahari*, 2)

मित्रे शत्रौ त्वविषमं तव पद्मनेत्रम्
स्वस्थे दुःस्थे त्ववितथं तव हस्तपातः ।
मृत्युच्छाया तव दया त्वमृतञ्च मातः
मा मां मुञ्चन्तु परमे शुभदृष्टयस्ते ॥

To friend and foe your lotus-eyes are even; ever your animating touch brings fruit to fortunate and unfortunate alike; the shade of death and immortality—both these, O Mother, are your grace supreme! Mother Supreme! May your gracious face never be turned away from me, your child. —Swami Vivekananda

THIS MONTH

Gender, class, and ethnicity are some of the strongest determinants of our socially constructed identities. There has been a growing realization that the feminine dimensions of the human personality need to be fostered to redress many of the iniquities that plague the overwhelmingly patriarchal global order. **Discovering the Feminine** does not appear to be an easy task. Yet, it is a spiritual imperative that needs to be addressed both at individual and collective levels.

India has been witness to the flowering of Mother-worship in diverse forms. Here the Mother Goddess has been venerated since pre-Vedic times and sophisticated spiritual and philosophical insights and advanced rituals and cultic forms have been developed by Devi-worshippers over the centuries. Swami Satyasthananda, a monastic member of the Belur Math, explores some of these issues in **Worship of God as Mother in the Indian Tradition**.

It is nearly fifty years since the global women's movement picked up steam, resulting in many initiatives to highlight the plight of women as also programmes to mitigate their ills. Prof. Chenchulakshmi Kolla, Department of Philosophy, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, examines the impact of these efforts on Indian women in **Changing Perspectives on Women and Development**.

With a major ecological catastrophe looming large on the horizon, sustainable development is a current buzzword. In **The Feminine Dimension of Sustainable Development**, Dr T V Muralivallabhan,

Reader, Department of Economics, SVRNSS College, Vazhoor, takes a gendered look at this issue.

Working women, who were till recently looked upon as superwomen, are swiftly becoming the norm in urban India. Ms Seema Burman talks to some of these women about the challenges in their personal and spiritual lives in **Who Wants to Be a Superwoman?** The author is a freelance journalist and television artiste employed with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

Dr Anil Baran Ray, senior professor, Department of Political Science, Burdwan University, looks into Nivedita's efforts to encourage the cultivation of social and civic ideals in Indian art in the second instalment of **Sister Nivedita: Art for National Awakening**.

Sri Somenath Mukherjee, Researcher, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, presents a hitherto unpublished letter written by Swami Vivekananda to Nikola Tesla as he concludes his article on **Swami Vivekananda and Nikola Tesla: New Findings**.

The Millenium Development Goals are reviewed in the light of Swami Vivekananda's thought by Brahmachari Ajitachaitanya of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur, in the concluding section of **Towards Humanitarian Development**.

Swami Chetanananda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, focuses on the unique relationship between **Girish and Sri Sarada Devi** as part of his ongoing research on Girishchandra Ghosh.



Discovering the Feminine

WHEN the poet saint Mirabai visited Vrindaban, she sought a meeting with Rupa Goswami, one of the famous 'six goswamis' of Vrindaban. Rupa Goswami was a strict follower of Vaishnava principles. As a renunciant he was not supposed to hold conversation with women, and he made this known to Mirabai. Mirabai, of course, was no ordinary woman. She sent back word to the goswami: 'I thought there was only one *purusha*, male, in Vrindaban—indeed, the whole universe—Krishna.' This was the ultimate Vaishnava realization. Rupa Goswami could not but welcome Mirabai with all cordiality.

Was Rupa Goswami being given a lesson in Vaishnava theology? That seems hardly likely. As a leader of the Vaishnava movement of Sri Chaitanya, he was also an adept in *raganuga-bhakti*, the devotion which imitates the highest manifestations of love, *ragatmika-bhakti*, seen in the inhabitants of Vraja of Krishna's time. According to the Vaishnava teachers 'if you want to see that wonderful divine romance between Radha and Krishna in the abode of your consciousness, you must first make your body, mind, and speech free from lust, then learn to perform selfless service by following the example of any one of Radha's companions. Then you will realize that Vrindaban, the playground of Krishna, is ever established in your heart and that divine play is continually enacted there.'

According to a popular legend of Vrindaban, Shiva, out of his great love for Krishna, wished to participate in the *rasa lila*, Krishna's sport with the gopis in the groves of Vrindaban under the autumn moon. But he found it impossible to enter Vrindaban. He consulted Yoga-maya, Krishna's Shakti—the goddess responsible for the *rasa lila*—and was informed that he could not enter Vrindaban in a male body, though

it be that of an ascetic who has mastered desire or kama. She advised him to bathe in the Manasarovar, a pond three miles across the Yamuna and a favourite haunt of Radha. That would transform his body into that of a gopi, enabling him to enter Vrindaban. Shiva complied and had his wish fulfilled.

The goswamis of Vrindaban and their followers dwelt elaborately on the need to develop a *bhagavati tanu* or *siddha rupa*—an inner meditative body suitable for offering the desired service to one's Chosen Deity, *antas-chintitabhishhta-tat-sevopayogideha*. It is in this *siddha rupa* that the Vaishnava devotee develops the capacity to function as Radha's companion in her service to Krishna. Since this is an exclusively feminine role, the *siddha rupa* of the devotee must needs be feminine.

To men uninitiated in the intricacies of Vaishnava doctrine and practice, cultivation of femininity may appear unnatural. By the age of two most children develop 'gender identity'—being able to tell whether they are boys or girls. In another two years' time an understanding of 'gender stability'—that one will continue to be male or female when grown up—is in place. And by the time they are six or seven children acquire 'gender consistency'—the conviction that even if they adopt the dress, appearance, and behaviour of the opposite sex they would retain their current sexual identity. Thus gender identity is established well before the dawn of sexual maturity and is largely influenced by 'gender stereotypes'—society's beliefs about the traits and behaviour of males and females—and 'gender roles', behaviour expected of males and females in given situations.

While some traits are indeed significantly influenced by sex hormones, many commonly accepted gender roles are not directly linked to biological

sex. Thus the male sex hormone testosterone predisposes one to aggressive behaviour, but the link between empathy and oestrogens is dubious. Yet managing homes, nursing, and teaching young children are largely seen as feminine roles in our society, while machining and engineering are domains dominated by men.

‘Gendered discourse’ is a much subtler phenomenon. It refers to ‘a system of meanings, of ways of thinking, images, and words that first shape how we experience, understand, and represent ourselves as men and women, but that also do more than that; they shape many other aspects of our lives and culture. In this symbolic system, human characteristics are dichotomized, divided into pairs of polar opposites that are supposedly mutually exclusive: mind is opposed to body; culture to nature; thought to feeling; logic to intuition; objectivity to subjectivity; abstraction to particularity; public to private; political to personal, ad nauseam. In each case, the first term of the “opposites” is associated with male, the second with female. And in each case, our society values the first over the second.’

Language is the pre-eminent medium of social discourse, and it is language that largely helps us crystallize gender roles and stereotypes as well as perpetuate the patriarchal dominance that has characterized virtually every society. That we still choose to use masculine nouns and pronouns when gender-neutral terms would be more appropriate—‘man’ for ‘humanity’ and ‘he’ for ‘he or she,’ for instance—is only symptomatic of this persistent male hegemony.

Given these patterns of gender roles and gendered behaviour, the distinction between the *siddha rupa* and the *sadhaka rupa*, the spiritual aspirant’s physical body, is important; and Rupa Goswami was acting upon this knowledge while refusing to meet Mirabai. The *siddha rupa* is a spiritual body, equivalent to the *karana sharira* in Vedantic terminology. The femininity engendered by this spiritual *siddha rupa* is deeper than and qualitatively different from that determined by physical sex or psychological gender. And we are largely unaware

of this deeper dimension of our being that needs to be carefully nurtured for it to manifest.

The distinctive character of the *siddha rupa* is suggested by Lakshmi’s inability to enter Vrindaban. At Bel-ban near Manasarovar there is a temple to Lakshmi, Vishu’s consort; but she has no shrine within the precincts of Vrindaban because she could not follow the way of the ecstatic gopis. A female sex or gender does not necessarily translate into femininity in the spiritual realm. The gopis, Sri Ramakrishna pointed out, ‘set aside their husbands, children, and families, gave up any consideration for their reputations, honour and dishonour, shame and hatred, and set aside all concern for public opinion and social propriety! This is the way one attains God.’ Such behaviour would hardly be considered feminine in a patriarchally gendered society. But in the spiritual realm this manifestation of power or shakti is quintessentially feminine.

Nor are gender identities in the spiritual realm static categories. For that matter, even in our mundane world gender identities are much more fluid than what is granted by our gender stereotypes. We have the capacity to form ‘secondary gender identities’ as we grow up. Moreover, our perception of gender keeps evolving throughout our lives. As they advanced in their love for Krishna, the gopis lost consciousness of their feminine identity and came to see themselves as Krishna, the eternal *purusha*. Andal is dressed up in male attire during some of the temple rituals at her birthplace, Srivilliputtur, to commemorate her identity with Krishna. Advanced spiritual souls can, of course, transcend all gendered identities and proclaim with the Vedic rishi Vak: ‘By me, whoever eats food, and whoever sees, / Whoever breathes, and whoever hears what is said. / They dwell in me, though they know it not; / Listen, O wise, to thee I say what is true.’

It may not be possible for all of us to access these supernal spiritual realms, but even an attempt in this direction can prove highly liberating. The Devi resides in all beings, male as well as female, as Shakti. Conscious accession of this Shakti is the secret of empowerment.



Worship of God as Mother in the Indian Tradition

Swami Satyasthananda

OF the diverse forms of worship prevalent in India from time immemorial, worship of the Divine Mother has occupied a place of singular significance. This idea of worshipping the Divine as the Eternal Mother has not been developed in any other religion of the world as it has been in the Hindu tradition and therefore it represents a unique contribution of Hindu thought to global religious culture.

According to Vedanta, when the formless and attributeless supreme Brahman assumes form with the help of its inscrutable power, *maya*, it is called Saguna Brahman or Ishvara. There are two aspects to the ultimate Reality: the absolute and the relative. From the absolute standpoint Brahman is impersonal and without attributes, *nirguna*; whereas from the relative standpoint it is *saguna*, the personal God. Though these two aspects appear to be mutually exclusive, they are in fact identical, much like fire and its power to burn. In India the personal God is worshipped in various forms and is called by various names. This has led to the formation of different sects. To Shaivas, Shiva is the Supreme Deity; to Vaishnavas, Vishnu; and to Shaktas, Shakti manifests as Mother or Devi. Again, according to the different temperaments of aspirants, the same deity is addressed as father, master, friend, beloved, or mother. Sri Ramakrishna always referred to God as 'my Mother'. The idea of addressing and worshipping God as Mother is a very ancient tradition in India. This idea finds expression in the Vedas and the Upanishads and was further developed in the Puranas and the Tantras.

Origin and Development of Mother-Worship

In India, where according to Manu 'the daughter is

the highest object of tenderness' and 'the mother is revered a thousand times more than the father', the adoration of the female principle in the Creation has been in evidence from the very beginning of civilization. Not only has God been looked upon as the feminine par excellence, the Divine Mother, but women have also been looked upon as manifestations of the Divine Mother and have been offered worship at every stage of life—as virgins, as married women, and as mothers. The Divine Mother is not only the mother of the universe, she is also the Eternal Virgin. From remote antiquity, through unrecorded centuries, right up to our own times, the conception and adoration of the feminine principle as Divine has undergone such evolutionary changes that it is difficult to exactly determine how and when the different forms of goddesses originated and developed in India's religious history.

The following seem to be plausible reasons for the development of Mother-worship in India: (i) the position women enjoyed at home and in society in the days when such worship started, and the position occupied by the mother as the highest of all feminine types at home and in society; (ii) the security the aspirant feels in the natural love and consideration of the mother towards her child; and (iii) the concept that God creates, sustains, and destroys the universe by his Power or Shakti. Swami Vivekananda points out a source in an old Vedic hymn to the Goddess: "I am the light. I am the light of the sun and moon; I am the air which animates all beings." This is the germ which afterwards develops into Mother-worship. By Mother-worship is not meant difference between father and mother. The first idea connoted by it is that of energy—I am the power that is in all beings.¹

Further:

Mother-worship is a distinct philosophy in itself. Power is the first of our ideas. It impinges upon man at every step; power felt within is the soul; without, nature. And the battle between the two makes human life. All that we know or feel is but the resultant of these two forces. Man saw that the sun shines on the good and evil alike. Here was a new idea of God, as the Universal Power behind all—the Mother-idea was born.

Activity, according to Sāṅkhya, belongs to Prakṛiti, to nature, not to Puruṣa or soul. Of all feminine types in India, the mother is pre-eminent. The mother stands by her child through everything. Wife and children may desert a man, but his mother never! Mother, again, is the impartial energy of the universe, because of the colourless love that asks not, desires not, cares not for the evil in her child, but loves him the more. And today Mother-worship is the worship of all the highest classes amongst the Hindus (8.252).

We find traces of Mother-worship in the Indus civilization. This civilization has been assigned to the third millennium BCE, and is characterized by urban culture. The female figurines in terracotta found at Mohenjo-daro are comparable to similar artefacts excavated from archaeological sites in Baluchistan, Elam, Mesopotamia, Transcaspiā, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Cyprus, Crete, the Balkans, and Egypt. It is probable that this devotion originated from a community of ideas shared by the people of these regions. The generally accepted view is that these figurines represent the Great Mother or Nature Goddess, whose worship, under various names and forms, is still prevalent in India.

The Vedic Period

There is a widespread misconception that the worship of God as Mother is a post-Vedic or non-Vedic practice. But this idea has no basis. Before dealing with the worship of God as Mother in the Vedic period, however, it is necessary to say a few words about the Vedic concept of the Godhead.

The history of Hinduism can be traced back

to the hymns recorded in the Rīg Veda. In these hymns we have the most astonishing record of the march of the human mind from the worship of the half-personified forces of nature like fire, wind, and rain to the realization of the absolute Spirit. We find the religious poets of the Vedas groping their way towards the Eternal—now marching ahead, now receding, now triumphant, and now dissatisfied—leaving behind them a trail of broken images, overthrown divinities, and abandoned faiths. Nothing mattered to them except a resolute search for unity.

The gods of popular belief, being only half-personified natural phenomena, gave them the clue. One God faded away into another. The same epithets had been employed to describe more than one God. When these divinities overlapped so much, it was inferred that they must all be one in essence. Hence the Vedic poets could freely extol one god as supreme at any given time, ignoring the claims of other gods. The myths of the Vedic Samhitas are unique in attributing the idea of infinity to every one of these gods. These deities or devas—Indra, Varuṇa, Vayu, and so on—are first worshipped as gods, and then are raised to the status of the Supreme Being in whom the whole universe exists, who sees every heart, who is the ruler of the universe. Again, with Varuṇa, another idea is perceptible in germ form: evil and fear. On committing evil deeds people become afraid and ask Varuṇa for pardon. These ideas of fear and sin never really took deep roots on Indian soil, but the germs were there.

Thus in the Vedas we see an early form of monotheism. This practice of invoking individual gods as the highest, the elevation to supremacy of one god at a time, has been termed 'henotheism' by Max Müller. The gods are thus taken up as it were, one after another, raised and sublimated, till each has assumed the proportions of the infinite personal God of the universe. The same is true of the Vedic goddesses. But this monotheistic idea did not satisfy the Vedic mind. There was an attempt to get behind these powerful gods and grasp the

‘power’ of which they were the manifestations. A well known hymn says: ‘That Being is one which the wise call by various names as Agni, Yama, and Matarishvan.’²

It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the mother goddess idea in the Vedas, but the fact that deities like Aditi and Saraswati are described by rishis as ‘motherly’ shows that the idea of the Mother underlying such Puranic deities as Uma, Durga, Parvati, and Lakshmi is undoubtedly of Vedic origin. The Vedic seer worships divinity in various devotional moods, the most elementary being that of the child towards its mother. We find this manifest in such Rig Vedic phrases as ‘*Pitā mātā sadaminmānuṣāṇām*; Agni is always father and mother to humans’ (Rig Veda 6.1.5); ‘*māteva yadbharase paprathāno janam janam*; (Agni) sustains all beings like a mother’ (5.15.4); and ‘*vayam syāma māturna sūnavah*; (O Usha!) let us be dear to you like sons to a mother’ (7.81.4).

With the simplicity of a child Vedic seers look upon heaven and earth as Father and Mother and pray to them for protection from sin and guidance in the moral order. It is worth noting that when Mother Earth is invoked or entreated, she is usually invoked with Dyaus, yet it has to be admitted that the greatness and grandeur of Mother Earth commands reverential praise from her children, with whom the offering of songs is the real worship.

The Vedic conception of the Mother Goddess is found best represented in Aditi, who is mentioned no less than eighty times in the Rig Veda. She is the mother not only of the gods—*deva-mātā*—but also of kings, heroes, men, and women; of the entire nature—the manifest as also that which lies in the womb of the future. She is the mistress of the moral order that governs the universe and also the giver of freedom. This tradition of Aditi being the mother of the gods is found continued even in the Puranas.

The ‘Durga Sukta’ of the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* is one of the most beautiful hymns in the Vedas. Therein Agni is conceived of as the Divine Mother

Durga, the resplendent goddess, blazing in her power:

*Tāmagnivarnām tapasā jvalantīm vairocānīm
karmaphaleṣu juṣṭām;*

*Durgām devīm śaraṇamaham prapadye suta-
asi tarase namaḥ.*

I take refuge in the Goddess Durga, fiery in her lustre and radiant with ardency, who is the power of the Supreme manifest in diverse forms, residing in actions and their results. O thou skilled in deliverance, you steer us expertly across difficulties; salutations to thee.³

In another Vedic hymn Rishi Kushika invokes Night as Mother. She is the daughter of the heaven above, pervades the worlds, protects all beings from evils, and gives them peaceful shelter in her lap, mother as she is. In later Puranic texts Night is described as originating from maya, the creative power of Brahman, and is called Bhuvaneshwari—the sovereign mistress of the worlds. In the *Durga Saptashati* Mother Durga is given many epithets ending with the word *rātri* or night—*kālarātri*, *mahārātri*, and so on.

The most striking and comprehensive concept of the Divine as Shakti in the Vedas is found in the ‘Devi Sukta’. The whole hymn is an ecstatic outpouring of the realization of Brahman by Vak, the daughter of the sage Ambhrina. Realizing her all-pervasive identity she exclaims:

It is I (as identical with Brahman) who move in the form of the Rudras, the Vasus, the Adityas and all other gods. ... I am the sovereign power (over all the worlds), bestower of all wealth, cognizant (of the Supreme Being), and the first among those to whom sacrificial homage is to be offered; the gods in all places worship but me, who am diverse in form and permeate everything. ... I give birth to the infinite expanse overspreading the earth; my birthplace is in waters deep in the sea; therefrom do I permeate variously all the worlds, and touch the heaven above with my body. It is I who blow like the wind creating all the worlds; I transcend the heaven above, I transcend the earth below—this is the greatness I have attained.⁴

In the Upanisads

The Mother Goddess makes her appearance in the *Kena Upanishad* as Uma Haimavati, the power of Brahman. Having defeated the *asuras*, the *devas*—led by Agni, Vayu, and Indra—were puffed up with pride. They considered themselves all-powerful without knowing whence exactly their power came. Brahman appeared before them in the form of a *yakṣa* to remove their conceit—to show them that they were not only powerless but they also did not realize this fact. He asked Agni to burn a straw and Vayu to lift it. Both failed. To Indra the *yakṣa* did not even grant an interview. When Indra felt humbled, ‘Knowledge (of Brahman) made her appearance in the form of Uma,’ in all her splendour. She told Indra that the *yakṣa* was none other than Brahman, the ultimate Reality, the source of all powers. The *Devi Bhagvata* dwells elaborately on this legend and records Indra’s adoration of the Supreme Mother through various hymns. According to Shankaracharya and Sayanacharya, the Vedic commentator, Uma, who imparts the knowledge of Brahman is *vidyā* or ‘spiritual knowledge’ personified.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* also speaks of seven female powers—Kali, Karali, and so on—personifications of the flames of the sacrificial fire. The *Shvetashvatara*, a later theistic Upanishad, refers to the ‘innate power of the Supreme, concealed by its own nature.’⁵ The sages realized that this power, *mayā*, is none other than Prakriti, or primordial nature, ‘of infinite variety, with knowledge and action as its natural forms’ (4.10; 6.8).

In the Epics and Puranas

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty if any of the ceremonials and worship rituals of the Divine Mother in any of her currently popular forms—Durga, Chandi, or Kali—were in vogue, as we know them today, during the Epic Age of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In the ‘Balakanda’ of the Ramayana we do get the story of Goddess Uma, the youngest daughter of Mount Himavan, who was married to Rudra and was highly respected

by all gods, including Brahma. The Mahabharata also mentions Pradyumna’s worship of Goddess Katyayani and Aniruddha’s hymn to Goddess Chandi. Of particular importance is King Yudhishthira’s hymn to Goddess Durga.⁶ This hymn contains some descriptions of the Goddess which we are familiar with from Puranic times. In some recensions of the text we find another hymn to Durga chanted by Arjuna at the instance of Sri Krishna.⁷

Before we deal with the worship of the Divine Mother in the Puranas and Tantras we need to briefly review the origin and development of the idea of Shakti in India. In the concept of Shakti we find a happy blending of two elements, one empirical and the other speculative. On the empirical side is Shakti’s role in Puranic cosmogony. It is a universal human experience that there can be no creation without the union of two elements—the male and the female. By analogy with this empirical fact, the rishis conceived of the role of the primordial Father and primordial Mother in the origination of the universe. The mother held a very important position in many ancient communities; hence it was natural that the Cosmic Mother should become the most important deity. The *linga* and *yoni*—representing the masculine and feminine respectively—have been the traditional symbols of Shiva and Shakti since ancient times. In virtually every Shiva temple the deity is depicted in the dual aniconic *linga-yoni* form representing the eternal union of Shiva and Shakti.

Again, it was observed that all existent objects were associated with intrinsic powers. So the Supreme Being, who is responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe, must possess infinite powers to carry out these functions. The very fact of its existence presupposes infinite powers. Though the belief in the powers of the Divine is universal, it is lent a special colour in India by the dominant Indian tendency to view this power, this universal energy, as a female counterpart or consort of the ‘possessor of that power’. Thus Shakti came to occupy an important place in the religious consciousness of not only the Shaktas—for whom

Shakti is supreme—but also of virtually every other religious sect, including the Shaivas, the Sauras, the Ganapatyas, and the Vaishnavas.

This strong belief in Shakti has fostered a popular synthesis of such apparently contradictory philosophies as Sankhya, Vedanta, Vaishnavism, and Tantra. The Sankhya speaks of Purusha and Prakriti as two independent ultimate realities whose interaction is of the nature of an object and its witness, the 'accidental' contact of Prakriti being a mere attribution on the unattached Purusha. In the Puranas and related popular religious literature, Prakriti is plainly conceived of as Purusha's female counterpart, and the Prakriti and Purusha of the Sankhyas become identified with Shakti and Shiva in the Tantras. Similarly, in Vedanta the principle of maya is viewed as the Shakti of Brahman. In later popular religious traditions these pairs came to be identified with such deities as Vishnu and Lakshmi, Rama and Sita, and Krishna and Radha.

Though we have traced the origin of Mother-worship to the Vedas as well as to pre-Vedic cults, it is in the Puranas and the Tantras that the concept of Shakti as Mother Goddess attained remarkable development. We find many of the feminine deities of the Vedas and the Upanishads gradually becoming the Supreme Goddess in the Puranas and the Tantras. Such relations may be traced between the Vedic Goddess Ratri and the Puranic deities Kali and Parvati. In the *Brihaddevata* Devi Vak is addressed as Ratri, Saraswati, Aditi, and Durga.⁸

In the vast and varied corpus of Puranic literature, where the abstract principles of the Vedas and the Upanishads are manifested in more concrete forms, Shakti appears in the form of such deities as Chandi, Durga, Jagaddhatri, and Annapurna. The voluminous *Devi Bhagavata* is devoted to the celebration of various exploits of the Great Goddess. Another important Shakta text is the *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*, also known popularly as *Chandi*. Comprising thirteen chapters from the *Markandeya Purana*, this text elaborates upon the concept of Shakti as the Great Mother and the

highest Truth through allegory and is regarded as the most sacred text of the Mother-worshippers of India.

In the *Chandi* the goddess has been mainly styled 'Devi', but she became well-known in later times as Durga. The epithet 'Durga' has been variously interpreted in Puranic and Tantric literature, the central idea being that of the Mother Goddess who saves us from every misery and affliction, from all danger and difficulty. She is also called Chandi, the fierce goddess, in which form she incarnates herself for the purpose of destroying the *asuras* whenever they threaten the mental peace and heavenly dominion of the devas. Durga is also worshipped as Annapurna or Annada, the giver of food, and as Jagaddhatri, one who upholds the world. In spring she is worshipped as Vasanti, the spring goddess. In the 'Devi Kavacha', an auxiliary of the *Chandi*, the Devi is conceived of in nine forms, Nava-durga: Shailaputri, daughter of the mountains; Brahmacharini, dwelling in Brahman; Chandraghanta, who has the moon for her bell; Kushmanda, the fertile; Skandamata, mother of the war god Skanda; Katyayani, the daughter of Rishi Katyayana; Kalaratri, the dark night of dissolution; Mahagauri, the light of knowledge; and Siddhidatri, the bestower of success. The Devi is also conceived of in three forms according to the preponderance of each of the three gunas: of *sattva*, Maha-saraswati; of *rajas*, Maha-lakshmi, and of *tamas*, Maha-kali.

The ten Mahavidyas are another set of representations of the Devi. Their origin is narrated in connection with the legend of Shiva and his consort Sati. Sati's father Daksha undertook a big sacrifice and invited all the gods to attend it. But he deliberately chose to ignore his son-in-law Shiva because of his rustic habits and dishevelled appearance. Shiva, of course, did not feel offended, but Sati did. She decided to visit the sacrifice and disrupt it. Shiva was not willing to permit this. Sati's anger increased and she assumed the ten largely fearsome forms of the Mahavidyas: Kali, Tara, Shodashi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Matangi, Chhinnamasta,

Dhumavati, Bagala, and Kamala. Scholars are disposed to think of the ten Mahavidyas as different local deities who were later associated with and assimilated into the great Mother Goddess tradition through legend and theology. The sadhakas, on the other hand, would take them as different aspects of the same Great Mother Shakti suited to the tastes, temperaments, and mental levels of spiritual aspirants.

It will not be out of place here to mention the denouement of the story of Daksha's sacrifice. Sati goes to the sacrifice and, unable to stand the insult heaped on her husband, ends her life by entering the sacrificial fire. On getting the news of Sati's demise, Shiva is beside himself with grief and starts roaming the universe with Sati's corpse on his shoulder. Fearing that Shiva's grief and anger would ruin the worlds, the gods approach Vishnu for help. Vishnu, the ever-merciful protector of the universe, quietly approaches Shiva and with his discus dismembers Sati's corpse into fifty-one pieces. Relieved of the corpse, Shiva manages to overcome his grief, while each of the fifty-one places where parts of Sati's body fall become sacred to the worshippers of Devi.

The *Durga Saptashati* gives us a glimpse into the nature of the Divine Mother in the hymn addressed to her by Brahma, the Creator:

You are verily that which cannot be uttered specifically. You are Savitri (the liberating mantra) and the supreme mother of the gods.

By you this universe is borne, by you this world is created, by you it is protected, O Mother Divine, and you always consume it at the end. O you who are (always) of the form of the whole world, at the time of creation you are of the form of the creative force, at the time of sustentation you are of the form of protective power, and at the time of dissolution of the world, you are of the form of destructive power. You are the supreme knowledge as well as the great nescience, the great intellect and contemplation and also the great delusion. The power of good is yours, the power of evil too is yours.

You are the primordial cause of everything,

bringing into force the three gunas—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*—you are the dark night of periodic dissolution. You are the great night of final dissolution and the terrible night of delusion. You are the goddess of good fortune, the ruler, modesty, intelligence characterized by knowledge, bashfulness, nourishment, contentment, tranquillity and forbearance. Armed with various weapons you are terrible. Again, you are pleasing, yea, more pleasing than all the pleasing things and exceedingly beautiful. You are indeed the Supreme Empress, beyond the high and the low.

And whatever, or wherever a thing exists, conscient or non-conscient, whatever power all that possesses is yourself.⁹

This is the soul-enthraling conception of the Divine Mother whom Hindus worship with great éclat in autumn. This autumnal worship of Mother Durga is especially prominent in Bengal. In the image used for this worship she is usually portrayed in the form of Mahishasura-mardini, slayer of the demon Mahisha—who took the form of a buffalo, as narrated in the *Chandi*. The Devi has a lion for her *vāhana*, vehicle, and is accompanied by her daughters Lakshmi and Saraswati—or her companions Jaya and Vijaya—as well as her sons Ganesha, the giver of success, and Kartika, the commander-in-chief of the gods. Kali is another popular goddess whose special annual worship is performed on the new moon night after the autumnal Durga Puja.

(To be concluded)

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Changing Perspectives on Women and Development

Prof. Chenchulakshmi Kolla

WOMAN has long been looked upon as an enigma. She has been treated with suspicion and awe. She attracts and repels, is desired and feared, pursued and shunned, and in spite of physical intimacies continues to be a thing of mystery. She is not so much 'human' as 'female' and in the eyes of men remains the 'eternal feminine'. 'Woman,' said the German writer Novalis 'is man's goal.' In the words of Germaine Greer, one of the founding figures of the feminist movement of the 1960s, 'All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve nothing, for she is the reward of achievement.'

Within herself she possesses certain transcendent qualities which she shares with the Mother Goddess. She embodies mystery through her fruitfulness. She is associated with nature and with the earth. Because of her unique physiological experiences—menstruation, defloration, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and the like—her being is linked with the mysterious periodicities related to the phases of the moon, the cycle of months,

the seasons of the year, and the rhythms of nature. She lives separate existences as virgin, wife, mother, widow, or spinster—each with its own experience and power. As a mother she is one of the great primordial archetypes of humanity.

Woman is superior to man in many ways. She has greater vitality. Her resistance to disease, physical injury, and major shocks is better than man's. She is more practical and down-to-earth. Some anthropologists hold the opinion that rule by women preceded rule by men. Woman is the originator of families, the preserver of established order, and the perpetuator of traditions, which she imparts to children. As the Great Goddess, she rules the heavens, as woman, she rules the home.

But women have also been subject to pervasive discrimination down the ages. These inequalities and iniquities cover such wide-ranging issues as gender, health and reproduction, education and employment, economic status, violence, politics and legal protection. In this article we shall take a brief look at some of these issues.

The Women's Movement

It is now widely accepted that development processes in many parts of the world, including India, have neglected women. In 1972 the United Nations declared 1975 to be the International Women's Year. This led women the world over to ask the question: Was this an admission that every other year is a 'men's year'?¹ We talk of revolutions, both political and economic. The greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects the status and the living conditions of its women.² Today women's struggle for their rights is not merely a national concern but an international humanist movement. If feminism is viewed as a protest against women's oppression, there is no confining it within the narrow boundaries of country, culture, or time. Feminism has been seeking for women the same opportunities and privileges that society gives to men; it asserts the distinctive value of womanhood in the face of patriarchal denigration.³

'Development' signifies a broad-based progressive movement synonymous with growth, modernization, industrialization, self-reliance, and social change, culminating in national development. Thus development is a multi-dimensional evolution on social, economic, political, cultural, ecological, and human planes. Development involves a transformation of lifestyles. The women's movement rose as an ideological reaction to the conditions of life in which old patterns and ideals were rendered untenable.

Liberal feminism seeks to bring about more equitable and just development goals for women by blending tradition with modernity. Radical feminism has also begun to strike roots in India. It rejects all division of labour based on sex. It asserts that differences in rights and obligations among people should be based on merit, not on sex. The need to incorporate gender awareness in development policies was recognized nearly twenty years ago, when planners realized that modernization and development are seriously handicapped by the limitation of women's participation. The United Nations declaration of the Decade for Women: 1976–85, along

with five sessions of the UN sponsored 'Conference on Women'—and the preparations that went into them—lent further impetus to bringing women across the globe into the mainstream of life.

From the ultra-feminism of the 1960s to the introspection on women's status in the 70s, to the questions of 'women in development' in the 80s, and to 'gender issues' in the 90s, there has been a whole reshaping of human development paradigms over the last fifty years. The conception of women's status has evolved from the mere consideration of women's problems to women's issues, and finally to women's perspectives in development. It is now widely recognized that gender divisions are not fixed by biology, but constitute an aspect of wider social division of labour rooted in the context of cultural, religious, and ideological systems prevailing in society.⁴ Gender inequality has to be examined on a par with other forms of inequality defined by such factors as class, caste, and religion. Gender inequality within the family and unfavourable demographic outcomes such as early marriage and discrimination against daughters in provision of access to food and health care—resulting in their poor nutritional status and inability to seek health care for themselves—has been increasingly documented. The family has now been recognized as the primary site of oppression for women. In the Indian family women's autonomy and physical mobility are restrained by various cultural traditions and practices, the most prominent forms being seclusion, subservience, and self-denial.

Gender, Health, and Development

These three make up a dynamic triad. Without basic health a community cannot possess the physical and mental energy necessary for development. Gender and health have a crucial intrinsic interrelation. Women are especially burdened because it is they who are held responsible for feeding their families and children. Provision of water for household purposes is also a burden that is borne by women in many communities. Consequently, the lack of adequate water sources presents its own problems for women. This is often an undervalued issue.

Women's social status is largely determined by motherhood, which carries a high social value. On the other hand, infertility is a curse for women in India and is a prime factor in depriving them of their social status and personal worth. Such women face rejection by their husbands and families and are exposed to divorce. This is also true for women who bear only daughters. Some people even assume that it is always the woman who is infertile and it is she again who is responsible for determining the sex of the child. It is also unfortunate that family welfare programmes concentrate mainly on women as clients, although women are not the decision makers in most families.

Leisure is a rare pleasure in the lives of the large majority of women in India. Sometimes they spend as much as five hours every day collecting wood for household fuel. They have to spend precious time and energy travelling long distances in search of such basic necessities as water and fuel.

Shortage of water is often responsible for poor personal hygiene, especially among women who are in the reproductive age group and are menstruating. Lack of toilet facilities also increases the risk of infections and related diseases. Small houses with scanty ventilation and lack of the privacy needed for managing personal hygiene add to unsanitary domestic conditions and adversely affect women's health.

Education is intrinsic to development. It is an important instrument for empowering people with basic cognitive skills and for making them self-reliant. The preference for sons in many Indian communities has led parents to neglect the education of their daughters. Nowadays there is a growing demand among educated men for educated brides, and this has been acting as an incentive for parents to educate their daughters. But unfortunately education has failed to adequately enhance the social value of women. This is recognized as the single largest factor affecting development. Nevertheless, education is undoubtedly an important catalyst in women's development. Quality education, relevant to their needs, prepares people to participate in and decide on various issues of development.

Women retain the major responsibility for domestic chores, irrespective of their participation in non-domestic labour. They invariably work more hours than men, particularly in poor households. In the service sector women tend to be heavily concentrated in occupations that are seen as equivalent to traditional household tasks: teaching in nurseries and primary and middle schools, nursing, social and welfare activities, clerkship, and secretarial work. These are often viewed as 'low-status' jobs, merely because they are carried out by women. Women still constitute only a small minority in higher education, administration, research, and advanced training institutions.

The increased participation of women in income-generating activities, thereby reducing their economic dependence on men, has been perceived as bringing about greater freedom and equality in the personal life and status of women. But this advantage is lost if women have no control over their earnings. The income of most women is seen as family income, which is often taken over and spent by their husbands or other male members of the family according to their own wishes.

Family background and environment significantly influence women's participation in public life. Many political parties use women to boost the image of their party. But when women do succeed in getting themselves elected they are given insignificant portfolios. Rarely do they get to hold powerful and prestigious positions.

Violence against women and children is the most pervasive violation of human rights in the world today. Women of all ages are subjected to assault, rape, sexual slavery, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, verbal abuse, and even murder. Female foeticide, practised in several parts of India, has been related to the extravagant expenses involved in girls' marriages and a general preference for sons. For millions of women today the home is a locus of terror. Although the Indian Constitution grants equal rights and opportunities, the legal system has often failed to deliver justice to women in cases of divorce, maintenance, custody, and inheritance.

Personal and Social Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept which includes greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, and freedom from the shackles of oppressive tradition and customs. Various women's groups and organizations have started taking an active part in ongoing development programmes. The government is also actively involved in these.

Gender equality within the family can be taken as a turning point for empowerment of women in society. Parents must be encouraged to treat girl children as equal to sons. The mass media can play an important role by highlighting the achievements of successful women role models in various areas. Society should be aware that most divisions of labour, rights, and obligations linked to gender are socially determined and therefore changeable. Women must also involve their children in various tasks at home and thus break the prejudice regarding the kind of duties members of each sex should perform. For instance, while sons should be encouraged to assist in the kitchen and learn cooking, daughters should acquire the skills for carrying out minor repairs.

Family planning services need to be aimed at men as well as women. Women have started paying attention to environment and sanitation, which affect their lives to a greater extent. A Medha Patkar has emerged from the concern of people, especially women, about potentially deleterious effect of large water projects on their lives. Women, after all, have been traditionally responsible for managing the water resources in and around their homes.

The labelling—overtly or in disguise—of the wide ranging contributions of women as 'unproductive work' has serious economic repercussions for women and lowers their status in family and community life. There are gross misrepresentations of the income, investment, and developmental achievements of women at the national level. Effort should be put forth to move women into more remunerative and decisive positions to help them

out of enforced stagnation. Entrepreneurship programmes can help women with self-employment. Family violence affects the healthy development and productivity of all societies. Conscious effort must be put in to bring this down. It is now widely acknowledged that women are the cornerstone of sustainable development. Protection of their rights and raising their status is essential in such diverse fields as education, politics, family planning, and employment. Poverty, discrimination, ignorance, and social unrest are common causes of violence against women.⁵ India has the credit of having produced, from ancient times, women of excellence in almost all walks of life. The future of the feminist movement depends not only on women but also on men, who must be sensitized to gender issues. Men should realize in all broad-mindedness the harmful consequences of these inequalities and help eradicate the deep-rooted discrimination against women that has characterized human history.

To theoreticians inequality of gender is *passé* and the world belongs to women as the equals of men. But as Justice V R Krishna Iyer pointed out, with each passing day gender-related crimes are escalating and the human rights flag must fly at half mast in humiliation until womankind is totally delivered from this unkind turpitude.⁶



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The Feminine Dimension of Sustainable Development

Dr T V Muralivallabhan

DEVELOPMENT is a multidimensional concept which includes qualitative and quantitative changes of a positive nature. True development involves natural growth through natural instincts under natural conditions and at a pace determined largely by nature. Anything unnatural or artificial is bound to adversely affect both the process of development as well as its beneficiaries.

Nature of Modern Development

Modern development is human-centred. It is scientifically determined and technologically induced. It has helped a significant section of humanity to rise from the realm of needs to the level of comfort, and then to that of luxury. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the concept of development was based on a mechanistic view of the world, propagated by modern science and society. Material sciences and their precursors, as well as modern culture, have been based on philosophical, social, and political systems 'in which men—by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labour—determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male'.¹

A society based on patriarchal or masculine values is demanding, aggressive, competitive, rational, and analytic. The scientific and technological foundations of modern development are overwhelmingly influenced by these features. The mechanistic foundations and materialistic structure of modern society regards matter as the basis of all existence and the material world as 'a multitude of separate objects assembled into a huge machine'. This world view helped in understanding complex

phenomena 'by reducing them to their basic building blocks and by looking for mechanisms through which these interacted. This attitude, known as reductionism, has become so deeply ingrained in our culture that it has often been identified with the scientific method.'² Bacon, Newton, and Descartes were the pioneering advocates of this reductionist view. Their thinking influenced scientists of every branch of knowledge and consequently various disciplines of study came to be treated as watertight compartments; thus the underlying interrelationships among various branches of knowledge remained undervalued.

According to Fritjof Capra, Francis Bacon wanted to 'torture nature's secrets from her' with the help of mechanical devices. 'The ancient concept of the earth as nurturing mother was radically transformed in Bacon's writings, and it disappeared completely as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to replace the organic view of nature with the metaphor of the world as a machine' (41). Thus modern development has patriarchal values as its foundation, the mechanistic model as its four walls, and the reductionist view as its roof. This approach has seriously disturbed the balance of the earth as an organic system.

Patriarchal Punches on Mother Earth

The revolution in science and technology brought in its train the Industrial Revolution. The various stages of industrialization also mark a period of transition from natural instincts to artificial greed in the process of production and marketing. The new methods of production put tremendous pressure on the environment and natural resources. Mechanistic models of production supported by large-scale automation

distanced humans from nature and immersed them in a world of machines and artificial commodities.

It is not the need for normal gain but the greed for supernormal profit that is behind modern production systems. Large-scale technology leads to large-scale exploitation of resources, and large-scale production to large-scale consumption. All the patriarchal values are dominant in this present process of production and consumption. Greed for profit and consumption, creation of excess demand through advertisements, using coercion and force to occupy resources and raw materials, promotion of unhealthy competition among companies, establishment of monopolies, and the importance given to machines have reduced Mother Earth to a simple object—to be exploited and plundered for the selfish interests of a minority of humankind. This anthropocentric and masculine attitude has resulted in the depletion of natural resources and degradation of the environment.

The ravages suffered by the global ecosystem have already assumed the dimensions of a crisis. Global warming due to the green house effect causing drastic climate changes, ozone layer depletion, and acid rains pose serious challenges to the entire web of life. Emissions from industries, aeroplanes, and automobiles—carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide, methane, and chlorofluorocarbons—have contributed largely to this damage. Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are now thirty per cent higher than what they were in the pre-industrial period (1750–1800). This is the largest single contributor to global warming. Rise in global temperatures is rapidly depleting the polar ice caps and the resulting rise in sea levels threatens to increase the miseries of millions of people.

Recent studies indicate that the ozone layer in the lower stratosphere—between 10 and 20 km above the surface of the earth—has thinned by an average of 30–40 per cent above Antarctica. This exposes living beings to an excess of ultraviolet radiation, inducing various diseases and harming vegetation. Climate changes are notoriously difficult to predict and their impact equally hard to assess. But

there is now sufficient evidence to show decisively that a major human-induced climatic change has taken place over the last century, and this is going to have serious repercussions on human beings as well as on agricultural produce and livestock.

Pollution of air, water, and soil also pose grave hazards to life. The mortality and morbidity rates increase with air pollution. Insecticides, pesticides, and the remnants of chemical fertilizers adversely affect the quality of water. According to a UN study, 41 per cent of the world's population—2.3 billion humans—live in areas with water scarcity, and water shortages are responsible for 4 million deaths annually. About 2 billion hectares of land—15 per cent of the earth's land area—has been degraded by intensive agriculture and other human activities. The worldwide loss of productivity due to soil erosion alone is estimated to be equivalent to 20 million tons of grain per year.

Deforestation, loss of biodiversity, acid rain, and toxic wastes are also major environmental problems. To make matters worse, depletion of mineral resources is also an issue of great concern. The present stock of coal and iron resources is likely to last only a few centuries. Tin, lead, and aluminium ores are likely to last only a few decades. All these factors together make life on this planet a great challenge. These challenges are adversely affecting human life in general and the health and well-being of women in particular.

Gender Dynamics of Environmental Crises

A gender-specific analysis of the social dimensions of environmental degradation reveals that women are the worst sufferers of this problem. 'Women feel most immediately the effects of environmental degradation, because they are typically responsible for water and fuel collection, food preparation, and family health care.'³ Women are assumed to be a natural constituency and an ample labour supply for environmental initiatives. Unless environmental programmes devote attention to getting an empirical understanding of women's suffering and miseries, no development programme can be

sustainable at the social level.

Hence, a good development model 'should take into account gender-specific production processes, women's access to resources, their responsibilities and their use of time' (ibid.). This is because under the modern social setup, where male chauvinism exerts its pressure through all possible methods, women often remain cornered and helpless. According to a UNICEF report of 2005, two thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate adults are women. A 1999 global report of the Johns Hopkins University noted that at least one in every three women is a survivor of some form of gender-based violence. Thus women have been largely robbed of a dignified life both in public and in private.

In their book *Ecofeminism*, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva see 'Western patriarchy's special epistemological tradition of the "scientific revolution", which is "reductionist" in nature as a 'source of violence against women and children'.⁴ Vandana Shiva believes that techno-patriarchs and 'consumerist criminals' subject both nature and women to exploitation. The wounds of an injured Mother Earth can be neatly dressed and cared for only by her daughters, not by autocratic men.

Sustainable Development: Feminine Dimensions

In 1987 the twenty-three-member World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, published its report on *Our Common Future* after a four-year study of the relationship between environment and development. The process of reforms in development activities had, of course, started well before this. In the twenty years preceding the report, more than 130 countries had created new environmental agencies, signed more than 180 international agreements, and supported several thousand NGOs committed to environmental protection. In spite of all these efforts the global environmental condition remained critical. Therefore, the commission felt that a new development path was required—one that sustained human progress not just in a few

places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future. It is worth noting that this initiative to save the planet and future generations was launched by a study group whose leader was a woman. Hence it is but natural that we find feminine values and dimensions of development being given a predominant role in this report.

The WCED report gives the following definition of sustainable development: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'⁵ The concept of needs, in particular essential needs of the world's poor, to which priority ought to be given, is the central theme of the report. In this context, protection of the environment while promoting development is also discussed in detail.

It is imperative that all development effort, irrespective of the political or social status of the country concerned, be defined in terms of sustainability. As development involves a progressive transformation of society in all aspects—social, economic, ethical, scientific, technological, educational, and spiritual—it ought to be integral and holistic to be sustainable.

Such natural feminine traits as concern for others, equity, and social justice are central to the principles and practices of a need-based sustainable economy. The majority of people in developing countries are still unable to adequately access such basic needs as food, clothing, and shelter while the majority in developed countries enjoy luxurious lifestyles. While moving from necessities to luxuries we have been caught in the trap of overconsumption. Though consumption is an important factor in fuelling economic growth, overconsumption creates islands of prosperity amidst oceans of poverty. Mahatma Gandhi had rightly pointed out that the world has enough resources to satisfy everyone's needs, but not everyone's greed. This is why the feminine values of equity and social justice are integral parts of sustainable development, for 'sustainable development aims at meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life' (44). More-

over, redistribution of resources to at least alleviate the poverty of millions is an inalienable component of any sustainable-development programme.

Modern economic growth has been taking place at the cost of natural ecosystems. The utilization or degradation rate of most resources is more than the rate of regeneration. For example, one hectare of a tropical forest, with all its biodiversity, might have emerged as a result of the evolutionary process of a million years or more. But the same forest could be wiped out within a day in the name of development. This gap between the processes of degeneration and regeneration is virtually unbridgeable, and experts in sustainable development suggest a feminine touch to developmental policies to address this problem.

Women in Africa, particularly in the rural areas, are known to be the main custodians of indigenous knowledge in natural resource conservation and management. Studies in traditional food and agricultural systems have shown that they have developed effective sustainable livelihood styles. United Nations University experts, who have studied the role of women in sustainable development, believe that adherence to male generated policies that do not create a level playing field nor an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs will not help sustainable development. 'To foster these changes, studies must highlight policies and interventions that minimize gender inequalities and emphasize the critical role played by African women in the conservation and management of natural resources.'⁶

Vandana Shiva says that in the patriarchal calculus women's work and knowledge, which depend upon the principle of diversity, are always discounted. This is because in the patriarchal world view man is the measure of all value and there is no room for diversity, but only for hierarchy. Women being different are treated as unequal and inferior.⁷ Shiva, therefore, believes that in third-world situations sustainability has to be achieved at two levels simultaneously: that of natural resources and of livelihood. The conservation and regeneration of natural resources has to be linked with conservation of livelihood derived from natural resources and biodiversity. Women's work

and knowledge are central to biodiversity conservation and utilization of resources because women work 'between sectors' and perform multiple tasks. Therefore, any agency seeking to husband the earth's resources for present and future generations must possess a wife's mentality.

Changing the quality of economic growth, keeping the population at sustainable levels, and reorienting technology are some of the strategies adopted for sustainable development. Education of women is an important factor in the success of these strategies. It is not formal education alone that matters, but informal education together with the strengthening of traditional culture and rituals also influence sustainable attitudes in women. The United Nations has recognized the importance of traditional wisdom for fostering a sustainable society.

The Indian Approach

'Unity in diversity' is the main feature of Indian culture and tradition. Understanding and realizing this oneness of existence in a universe of plurality has long been considered the purpose of individual and social life in India. Beliefs, rituals, and customs have been so developed in India as to help one feel this Vedantic oneness both within one's heart and through one's mind.

Swami Vivekananda says:

This is another great theme of the Vedanta, this Oneness of life, this Oneness of everything. ... All our misery comes through ignorance, and this ignorance is the idea of manifoldness, this separation between man and man, between nation and nation, between earth and moon, between moon and sun. ... But the Vedanta says this separation does not exist, it is not real. It is merely apparent, on the surface. In the heart of things there is unity still. If you go below the surface, you find that Unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion.⁸

How can we bring about this experience of oneness? Swamiji continues: 'What we really want is

head and heart combined. ... Life is possible, progress is possible for him who has heart, but he who has no heart and only brains dies of dryness' (2.145).

The underlying truth of oneness is the goal of Vedanta, and the means a combination of heart and head! In other words, a union of the feeling and thinking abilities of human beings will give development its real meaning. The feeling aspect is usually seen as feminine and thinking as masculine. The ecological imbalance that we now see is a result of the tilt towards masculine or patriarchal values in development activities.

Sustainable development is integrated, holistic, and harmonious. The interrelationship ingrained in sustainable development is an integral part of Vedanta too. According to Vedanta, there is no difference in essence between the biotic and the abiotic. This interrelationship can be directly intuited in a non-intellectual experience of Reality, arising from an expanded state of awareness. In sum, the heart encompasses the interrelatedness of this universe.

Swami Vivekananda stressed the need for controlling nature—both internal and external. If we have succeeded in controlling internal nature, controlling external nature becomes easier. The harmony of human beings and nature is nothing but the harmony of the inner and outer worlds. Greed, the root cause of all disasters in outer nature—in the form of plunder of resources and degradation of environment—is the result of the loss of control over inner human nature. Changing one's mindset is the most important prerequisite for attaining the objectives of sustainable development.

Apart from the transcendental philosophy of Vedanta, the Vedic world view is peopled with immanent divinities. Aditi, the mother of all gods, is also described as the mother of the universe. Prithivi is Mother Earth. 'All motherly feeling, tender affection, generosity of heart and forbearance were attributed to Mother Earth, of whom the poets were proud to be the children, and the vastness, variety, resourcefulness and fertility of Mother Earth find innumerable patterns of expression.'⁹ The goddess Shri or Lakshmi is also identified with the earth.

असंबाधं बध्यतो मानवानां यस्या उद्धतः प्रवतः समं बहु ।
नानावीर्या ओषधीर्या बिभर्ति पृथिवी नः प्रथतां राध्यतां नः ॥

Untrammelled in the midst of men, the Earth, adorned with heights and gentle slopes and plains, bears plants and herbs of various healing powers. May she spread wide for us, afford us joy. —Atharva Veda, 12.1.2

यत् ते भूमे विखनामि क्षिप्रं तदपि रोहतु ।
मा ते मर्म विमृग्वरि मा ते हृदयमर्पिषम् ॥

Whatever I dig up of you, O Earth, may you of that have quick replenishment! O purifying one, may my thrust never reach right unto your vitals, your heart! —12.1.35

She is the goddess of harvest and fortune. In Puranic literature Mother Earth is Shakti.

In Indian culture the answer to the all-important question of sustainability is found in the integration of the feminine and the masculine in the person of the godheads: Brahma-Saraswati, Vishnu-Lakshmi, and Shiva-Parvati. The transcendent Brahman has a feminine counterpart in Mahamaya. The Ardhanarishwara image—half male and half female—also depicts a balanced view of the two genders. In all Vedic rituals the wife's role is as important as the husband's. Moreover, many of the Vedic saints and seers were women.

If women are seen as weak in Sanskrit literature—*abala*, the weak, is a synonym for woman—this view was superseded by that of woman as shakti, the source and embodiment of power. This concept is seen in the Vedic corpus and is fully developed in the Puranic and Tantric texts. It was also believed that the gods were pleased to see the worship of women. It was this balanced view regarding gender that nurtured India's golden age of prosperity. This practice put women at par with men and this gender balance was extended to matters of nature as well. As a result, in Indian texts we do not hear of exploitation of nature, but only of *dohana*, milking, much like that of the mother cow.

Shades of Green

The carpet of India's economic growth has been

Chipko: Hugging the Trees

I have been standing for ages,
 I wish to live for you.
 Do not chop me, I am yours.
 I wish to give you something in future.
 I am milk and water for you.
 I am thick shade and showers.
 I manufacture soil and manure.
 I wish to give you food grains.
 Some of my kind bear fruits.
 They ripen for you.
 I wish to ripen with sweetness. ...
 I am with Earth and life.
 I am everything for you.
 Do not cut me. I have life.
 I feel pain. So my name is tree.
 Rolling of logs will create landslides.
 Remember: I stand on slopes and
 below in the village.
 Where we were destroyed,
 Dust is flying there.
 The hilltops have become barren.
 All the water sources have been dried up.
 Do not cut us. Save us.
 Plant us. Decorate the Earth.
 What is ours, everything is yours.
 Leave something for posterity.
 Such is the Chipko movement.

—*Hugging the Trees*, 89–90

woven with many green threads contributed by women. Nature was preserved in India in keeping with traditional wisdom and the Mother Earth concept. By the seventeenth century, when masculine muscles began to tear down forests, women came to the forefront as fighters for the ecosystem. In 1730 three hundred and sixty three members of the Bishnoi community of Khejarli, in Marwar, laid down their lives in peaceful protest against the felling of trees in their village by the men of Raja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur. The first of these martyrs were women. This was probably the first incident where village women sacrificed their lives for environmental protection and also the first organized effort to

prevent cutting of trees, which is essential for conservation of forests and sustainable development.

The more recent Chipko movement for protecting Himalayan forests also involves active participation of women. Most contemporary leading environmental activists in India—Medha Patkar, Vandana Shiva, Sunita Narayan, and Sugatha Kumari, for instance—are women. Many of the NGOs engaged in environmental protection and sustainable development are led by woman. The recent agitation against water pollution and shortages resulting from operations of the Coca Cola plant at Plachimada in Kerala was led by a tribal woman, Mayilamma.

It is evident that from the philosophical as well as pragmatic points of view empowerment and participation of women are essential for protection of nature and sustainable development. Many nations of the world have recognized this fact and have separate policies for sustainable development involving participation of women at national and local levels.

The 'Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women', a report on the 1985 UN conference held to review the achievements of the UN Decade for Women, recognized important linkages between women's roles in development and protection of the environment. It also suggested measures to enhance women's participation in national ecosystem management and control of environmental degradation. The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women insists upon recognizing and promoting the role of women in sustainable development. A project for sustainable empowerment of women known as 'Subhiksha' has been implemented in the state of Kerala as part of the Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojagar Yojna. But, in spite of all these efforts, India still has a large gender gap to close.

The gender gap report for 2008 of the World Economic Forum reveals that, on the average, at the global level only 63 percent of the gender gap—formulated on political, economic, educational, and health-based criteria—could be closed in the year 2008. The four highest-ranked countries—Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland—have closed a little

over 80 percent of their gender gap and the lowest ranked Yemen could close only a little over 46 percent. India, ranked 113 of 130 countries, has still a 40 per cent gap to close.¹⁰


The Silver Lining of Spirituality

The dark clouds of gender disparity and environmental disasters have a silver lining—a trend towards finding sustainable solutions to environmental problems through spiritual re-awakening. Our present knowledge store is dependent to a great extent on the collective wisdom of the past, which includes both secular and spiritual aspects. In 1998, after visiting several developing countries, the World Bank president James Wolfson remarked that ‘these visits have brought home to me that the World Bank’s central mission is to weld economic assistance with spiritual, ethical and moral development’. According to a statement issued by the World Faiths Development Dialogue—an initiative pioneered by Wolfson and the Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey to facilitate a dialogue on poverty and development among people from different religions and between them and the international development institutions—‘What is clear is that there is a unity among us; a unity of concern, not only for physical livelihood, but also for spiritual and cultural continuity.’¹¹

Viewing external nature and its resources—including human resources, especially women—as assets open to exploitation and as only the means of satisfying one’s greed is the basis of the materialistic attitude towards life. On the other hand, regarding external nature and human beings as interdependent variables comprising a unified whole is the basis of spirituality. A spiritually-oriented society is bound to be more sustainable than a materialistic one. Swami Vivekananda supports this view:

In every society there is a section whose pleasures are not in the senses, but beyond, and who now and then catch glimpses of something higher than matter and struggle to reach it. And if we read the history of nations between the lines, we shall always find that the rise of a nation comes with the

increase in the number of such men and the fall begins when this pursuit after the Infinite, however vain Utilitarians may call it, has ceased. That is to say, the mainspring of the strength of every race lies in its spirituality, and the death of that race begins the day that spirituality wanes and materialism gains ground.¹²

Swami Vivekananda has voiced a universal truth in the above statement. Every modern branch of knowledge is an instrument to increase the material welfare of society. The various disciplines that are the ramifications of the tree of knowledge are but big zeros, to use Sri Ramakrishna’s metaphor; they lack intrinsic value if they are not preceded by ‘one’—the feeling of oneness derived from a spiritual vision. It is this larger oneness that will take humanity beyond the diversity of the material world and its inequalities—including that of gender—to the unity that sustains itself. 

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Who Wants to Be a Superwoman?

Seema Burman

WHAT should a woman do if her circumstances compel her to work or if she indeed wishes to work? Can a woman balance both her career and home? Without the support of her husband, children, and parents on both sides a woman cannot manage a full-time job and a happy home. For a career woman each minute is precious. Her day starts much earlier than the rest of the family and yet she is the most neglected. Everyone wants her time, nothing seems to move without her supervision; still everyone complains she gives priority to her outside job over all of them. In her attempt at managing everything successfully she may be termed a 'superwoman', but several loopholes in her home and career betray the epithet. Children may remain uncared for, the husband constantly complains and makes demands, the natural exigencies of her professional activity consume a large part of her energies, and as a consequence of all these her health gradually deteriorates till she develops many chronic diseases.

A study undertaken in 1997 by the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* found that 'stress appears to be strongly related to being employed outside the home and is more strongly felt by women working more hours, especially those working full-time.' A CBS News poll conducted in April 2006 found that sixty-eight per cent of women see a conflict between working and raising a family.

Many working mothers regret missing their baby's first steps, hearing their first words, seeing their new pranks. At this point most women contemplate taking a long leave or getting a transfer or changing their jobs. But the decision depends on how much their homes depend on their income, how much other family members cooperate in the household duties, and how the family as a unit would be psy-

chologically affected by a change of this nature. Each case and the character of each woman calls for a different individualized approach.

Working Mothers' Voices

Rashmi Sharma, a senior officer in the Ministry of Agriculture at New Delhi, tells her story: 'It is a fact that we are unable to look after our children as we ought to; kids also have to make sacrifices if their mothers are working. I generally ignored my children's health. At times I gave them medicines and rushed to the office, leaving them at the mercy of medicines. Only when they had high fever did I take leave from my office. But it is precisely when kids are ill that they need a loving person near them—working women's children have to get cured without their mother's care.

'Being a senior officer I have many responsibilities and it is not proper for me to take leave every now and then; there are many colleagues working under my instructions. But whatever free time I get, I make a point of spending it with my children. The nature of my job is such that I have to go to the office even on holidays. Indeed, a government job is a twenty-four-hour job. At times we are told at the last minute to remain in the office till late hours, and this has disrupted my family life more than anything else. When my children were younger they often used to complain about this. It was only when they grew up that they began to understand that their mummy had to go out and work and follow the discipline of her workplace.

'I have always considered that looking after my children and family was a greater worship than any other. I was also very much interested in religious functions, rituals, customs, but I could follow none of them. I have read our scriptures as part of my

curriculum; I obtained master's degrees in Sanskrit and Hindi, and then an MPhil in Sanskrit—we were taught the Ramayana, Mahabharata, *Manu Smriti*, Dharmashastra, Sankhya philosophy, and the Upanishads. To me following rituals is not as important as implementing their essence in day-to-day life. The real issue is to behave in such a way that would please both society and God. I am sure God would be very happy if I help my children develop good samskaras rather than offer sweets and other things in a temple. The conclusion I have reached after reading the scriptures is that one should lead a moral life. This moral attitude makes me do my work to the best of my ability, even if I have to forego my free time. Lunch hour is one such free time in which some ladies sit and read the Bhagavadgita or Ramayana, or simply take a short nap. I prefer doing my job even at that time, and only if perchance I get some extra time I join the reading group. I have full faith in God, and at the same time, if my office work is pending I prefer to finish that first.

'My husband works as physiotherapist in Safdarjung Hospital and realizes how much pressure my work entails. Despite his professional discipline, he loves to perform rituals and spends hours worshipping. Our children have inculcated all these values, possibly as a result of their parents' inclinations. My son is now married and keeps on informing us about his whereabouts, does not smoke or drink, does not go to parties or discos, and does not even touch outside food. This makes me happy. My daughter is clever, in the sense that she decides what is good for her and her near ones. She too is studying physiotherapy and treats me like her friend. I am lucky that my family is God-oriented and follows moral principles. So, in spite of all the difficulties I have had to face, I do not have any grudge of having chosen a career over a housewife's life.'

One of the problems working mothers face is that they do not give proper attention to their own physical and emotional health. Stress can cause physical ailments as it weakens the immune system. A woman who has to handle work pressure and domestic responsibilities has no time for her

friends, physical exercise, hobbies, or any kind of leisure—she may not have time even for meditation or prayer. These activities are important for a woman's emotional well being and help her calm down, maintain peace, and remain connected with her inner self despite today's hasty lifestyle.

Gurmeet Kaur is a young wife, married to a lawyer and with a two-year-old son, Simar. She works as a personal assistant in the Ministry of Urban Development at Nirman Bhavan, New Delhi. 'I always wanted a career,' she says. 'A woman should be independent and for that she must work. Only then can she understand the value of money, which makes one financially strong. I never realized the difficulties of a career woman till I got married; the problems became especially pressing when my son was born. Simar needed me for everything and I had to run to the office after availing the maternity leave. He would cry and that was heart-rending. Actually a mother needs to be at home with the children and only now I begin to understand the value of a joint family. Leaving a kid with complete strangers in a crèche is simply 'no-no'. All this balancing between home and office creates a huge burden for women. My husband comes home quite late and I don't like disturbing him for small things, as he has case files to read and prepare; but when we have to take Simar to the hospital for injections or other treatments he manages to do it. We are always ready for our son, at the expense of our own health. I had pain in a tooth and kept ignoring it till it was unbearable; then the doctor said it had to be removed. It's not so much a question of time, but it is probably in my nature to ignore my own health issues. Many a woman may have this kind of nature. On the other side, having a career gives one an opportunity to meet different kinds of people and thus our social circle grows—and of course even friends complain we don't give them much time. In this regard I give preference to being in touch with my relatives, many times overlooking my personal friends.

'Our joint family consists of my parents-in-law and my husband's elder brother's family. My mother-in-law doesn't go out at all, so it is no problem for

her to look after my kid. The general situation in our home is good and I am confident that as long as Simar grows up in it he will be a normal child. If it happens that I find him misbehaving with his elders, lacking in manners or values, or ignoring his traditions, I sternly handle the issue—no pampering the kid because I have an outside job.

‘I don’t have time to read scriptures at home, though I do take out a few minutes to light the lamp before Guru Nanak. From the spiritual side I think it is good to leave Simar every day and go for work; this teaches us in a natural way the art of detachment. Just because a housewife stays at home throughout the day doesn’t mean she is taking better care of her children. Did you notice how attached to their mothers housewives’ children are? They cling to their mothers as if fearing for their lives, whereas our children happily trot about anywhere with their friends. I feel it is a myth that women who stay at home take better care of their children. Most of them waste their time gossiping and watching television, or indulging in family intrigues. A working mother is more caring, responsible, disciplined, and soon learns to adjust to life’s different situations. Every mother has a great role in bringing up her children and can give them better guidance if she has self-confidence. A working mother is a source of inspiration to her children, because by seeing her they realize that they must study hard, behave well, and become successful in life. And above all, through her example they can get a stronger feeling of independence and self-confidence, among other things, and be better citizens. I feel such children, when married, will have greater respect for their partners.

‘Coming back to the difficulties a working mother has to deal with, one is lack of proper sleep. A housewife can relax more than us. I generally don’t get full sleep. The first thing I do in the morning is bathing Simar, preparing his special diet, arranging his clothes for the day, and then handing him over to my mother-in-law—in between I have to get myself ready for work. Punctuality and alertness at office is a thing of the past. A working mother with a small child is always late and sleepy. However,

the government has recently taken a positive step by sanctioning a two-year paid child-care leave for working mothers. So now my husband doesn’t want me to leave the job, as it is too expensive to maintain a joint family with a single earning member.’

Varied Voices

It has been six months since Chandra Prabha started working for the first time, as a typist, after her husband passed away. She has a daughter of eight and a son of ten. ‘It was due to my husband’s death that I had to start working outside home; otherwise how would I sustain my family? I needed money and my typing came in handy. I strongly feel that if I could stay at home I would be able to look after my children far better. Right now I don’t know what they are doing. Are they playing in the sun, or are they making mischief? Have they taken their meal or their afternoon milk? I don’t live in a joint family, so who will look after my children during my absence? Throughout my working day I am thinking of and am awaiting the time when I can get back to them. After my husband’s death I’ve never had any support from my relatives, and my own personal life has been thoroughly neglected. I can neither do any spiritual practice nor follow any rituals. Earlier I used to perform puja for at least an hour and a half every Thursday, but now I barely have time to fold my hands before God. My children never ask me to stop going to the office, as they know that mummy has to earn money for food and school fees. They have matured a lot. In fact they keep telling me to work hard and try to become a permanent employee. At times I wish I were living in a joint family so that my in-laws could look after my children. As for my own health, it is gradually deteriorating, with little time to eat or sleep. Life is so full of tension.’

Rama Mukherjee is a teacher in Lal Bahadur Shastri Senior Secondary School at R K Puram, New Delhi. ‘My job as teacher gives me ample time to look after myself. I live with my sister in a flat. Being a devotee of Ramakrishna I go to the temple on certain important days. It is not possible for me to go there

everyday as I live very far away. Regarding working women, I feel they are definitely in a much better position than women who stay at home the whole day. By working, family life does not get affected at all. We earn and contribute to society; we are more creative members of society, whereas housewives usually indulge in eating, drinking, shopping, going to beauty parlours, and talking over the phone the entire day. They are unproductive members of society. But if a woman teaches scriptures to her children then it is a different matter.

‘For small children it is much better if their mother stays at home, as they need her when they come back from school. I agree that those who are working in offices have longer working hours, while we teachers work from 7.00 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., and we get summer and winter holidays as well. Mothers working at office must be having a harder time bringing up their children; but I guess no woman would like to leave her job just to sit at home the whole day. As for children having working mothers, being a school teacher I am well in contact with them, and my observation is that the children we have these days are too distracted. They carry mobiles, they explore the Internet, and they watch unnecessary programmes on television. Parents have no time to supervise them. Moreover, they even “bribe” their children, probably out of a guilt complex at not being able to give them adequate attention. Unless a working mother lives in a joint family, it is not easy for all the family members to cope with day-to-day difficulties, and this definitely affects the children’s character. The working woman has also to attend to the elderly parents-in-law at home. Elders do help with such errands as dropping and picking up the kids from school or the bus stop, but at the same time they have needs to be looked after—their medicine, diet, hospital appointments—and all these require time and attention. Many things have to be considered to run a family smoothly. However, all depends on one’s nature. A good human being will tackle things nicely, while a lazy woman will find ways to escape her duties irrespective of whether she is working or not.’

Manju Bahuguna is not working in a nine-to-five job. She is an artiste who acts in plays, films, and television programmes, and is also a stage com-père. Her husband is a chef in Centaur Hotel and they have three grown-up children—one daughter is a lecturer, the other is married, and the son is an architect. ‘I’ve always enjoyed full support from my husband and children,’ she says. ‘They are even proud of my achievements. In general women have to look after their homes and have more responsibilities than men, but my situation was rather different. My husband cooperated with me from the beginning. I never felt guilty, even if I had to go out of town for my acting. One thing is true, I was usually overstressed due to the exigencies of my job. My in-laws never objected to my odd work hours; in that sense you can call me fortunate. But I also tried to keep good relation with all my relatives. My children never had to suffer because of my career and my social circle was not overlooked either. As for my spiritual life, everyday I light a lamp in front of my *ishta*, Sai Baba and Ma Durga, and sit for ten minutes. This is all that I do, but when I go on tours my husband and children do not continue the practice. This is the only thing that has been affected due to my career. I strongly recommend a working life for every woman.’

It is not possible to pass a definitive judgement on who is better equipped to look after her children—the working woman or the housewife. Working mothers are always short of time, while many housewives waste their time. Whatever the case, if children suffer it is ultimately society that is harmed. Children who do not learn moral values will grow up into irresponsible citizens. Instead of arguing on who is nurturing their children better, governments and individuals should all feel responsible for helping children imbibe basic human and moral values and not send them messages that will teach them hatred and suspicion. In today’s busy world parenting has become a hard task. Research has shown that a child with strong moral values grows up to be a better human being and is happier than others.

(Continued on page 254)



Prince
Siddhartha,
Fresco
Painting,
Ajanta

Sister Nivedita: Art for National Awakening

Dr Anil Baran Ray

(Continued from the previous issue)

MANY of Havell's assertions—for example, about the *ideality* and *Indianness* of Indian art, and the absurdity of the contention of Greek influence on Indian art—had already found expression in Swami Vivekananda's utterances. The fact that Havell too subscribed to such views, articulating them in his own words and style, gave Nivedita special joy.

Havell performed a difficult job under equally difficult circumstances. His colleagues, particularly in the bureaucracy, were not happy with his approach to Indian art. Havell sought release from mental tension in Tantric exercises. Unfortunately, the result was otherwise; he lost his mental balance for some time and had to resign from the principalship of the Calcutta art school and return to England. But he recovered soon and continued in his role of defender and patron of Indian art.

During his stay in England Havell kept writing on Indian art. He would take part in scholarly meetings in England and protest against denigration of Indian art whenever the occasion would so demand. In one such meeting, in February 1910, he registered his protest against Sir George Birdwood's observation that the Buddha statues of India had some ugly features. Far from being ugly, Havell countered, the

Buddha statues were among the best creations of art. He sent a copy of this speech to Nivedita. In her letter of 3 March 1910, Nivedita fully endorsed Havell's view, emphasizing that the Buddha statues of India were not only among the finest specimens of Indian art but were also among 'the noblest symbols in the history of man'.¹⁵ She regarded Birdwood's remarks on the Buddha statues as 'the very effrontery of Philistinism', indicating nothing else than his inability to appreciate that the Indian ideals of meditative equanimity of mind found its best portrayal in the Buddha images of India. Commending Havell for the 'splendid fight' on behalf of Indian art, Nivedita wrote in her letter of 7 April 1910: 'We were all delighted with your splendid fight. ... You are doing wonders for Indian Art—and I now see how even your resignation of the work here can be made to serve the great cause' (2.1085).

As for Grunwedel's observation that the Hindus were incapable of evolving real sculpture, Nivedita remarked: 'I cannot understand what Grunwedel means by his strictures. ... Surely the fact that these [Ellora] statues stand against a rock does not constitute them mere relief!!!' (2.1086). Nivedita affirmed that each of her visits to Elephanta and Ellora filled her with awe and admiration for Hindu sculpture of the pre-Muslim period. Again: 'It [Ajanta] is a vastly greater factor in the history of India than one cd. [could] have dreamt. And Hindu sculpture of 600 to 1000 A.D. is *magnificent*! Such slenderness and beauty—especially of limb—one has never seen. This of course at Ellora and Elephanta. The *sculpture* at Ajanta could not be compared with it. But the *PAINTING*, especially of the Young Buddha and Yasodhara of Cave!—Magnificent!'¹⁶

Nivedita also took up this issue of unfair criticism of the Buddha art of India in the May 1910 number of *Modern Review*. The magazine published a letter by some English art critics protesting against Sir George Birdwood's views, and its editorial noted that only scholars like Havell, and not shallow critics like Birdwood, had the competence to get into the essence of Indian art and to communicate its philosophy and ideals to the world.

Nivedita and Havell, being like-minded in respect of their attitude to Indian art, proved to be strong pillars of support to the new art movement. In Havell, Nivedita got a man who had in his hand the charge of shaping the young talent of the country. Nivedita's central interest was the national awakening of India and she advocated the use of art to that end. To put the rationale of this in Nivedita's own words: 'The key to new conquest lies always in taking up rightly our connection with the past. The man who has no inheritance has no future.'¹⁷ Havell did not have the breadth of vision of Nivedita, but like her, he too was a crusader for *Indianness* in art. It is this common interest which opened the way for Nivedita to the art school and to its young students, whom she would now invite frequently to her own residence at Baghbazar to imprint upon their young and impressionable hearts the love for their country and its people. Pravajika Atmaprana records an interesting anecdote on how Nivedita inspired the young artists: 'One day Nandalal [Bose] and Surendranath [Ganguly] went to her house. She was not in the house, so they sat on a sofa in the outer sitting room. When Nivedita came back she asked them to sit on the floor cross-legged and herself sat on the sofa. They felt a little offended at first, but, when they saw Nivedita pointedly looking at them and then saying, "You are all Buddhas", they understood her purpose in making them sit Buddha-like on the floor.'¹⁸

Social and Civic Ideals in Art

A perusal of Nivedita's letters written between 1903 and 1906 shows the gradual flowering of her interest in various facets of Indian art. Her visit to places

featuring various aspects of Indian art—painting, sculpture, architecture—was an offshoot of this interest. Her letters bear pen-pictures of some of the places she visited—Ajanta, Ellora, Chittaurgarh, Bodh Gaya, Sanchi, Bhopal, Ujjaini, Ajmer, Agra, Allahabad, and Benares.

The one supremely important point to be highlighted is that Nivedita was interested not only in ancient and religious art but equally in social and civic art. Tireless in her campaign to direct the attention of young artists to the social and civic aspects of art, she would point out that such aspects of art were developed in Europe and in order to give them due place, modern India will have to join hands with Europe. As she observed, in matters of art India was not to hark back to old ways alone; she was to consider the suitability of new approaches as well, within, of course, the framework of Indian conventions and associations. To be really Indian, art must, above all, appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way; and to be of the highest mark, it must arouse in Indians such sensibilities as would make them feel nobler.¹⁹ It was with this conceptual framework that Nivedita advocated relating Indian art to civic and social ideals and recommended that India take a lesson or two from the works of such European artists as Puvis de Chavannes, a master of civic paintings.

Of Puvis de Chavannes's murals, 'Sainte Geneviève Watching over Paris' elicited the greatest admiration from Nivedita. The fresco painted

Sainte Geneviève Veillant sur Paris



on the walls of the Pantheon in Paris shows Sainte Geneviève praying for the well-being of Paris in the dead of night, when the whole city is asleep. It is the *idea* of the picture—the prayer of the selfless soul for the well-being of humanity—which appealed to her most. The mural was, in her opinion, among the finest portrayals of civic and social consciousness. The idea had such an irresistible appeal for Nivedita—dedicated as she was to the work of extending national consciousness in all spheres of Indian life—that she arranged to fix a picture of the mural over her writing desk in order to have it always before her eyes.

Among the other paintings by Puvis de Chavannes on the life of Sainte Geneviève, Nivedita admired the one which showed her distributing food to the hungry citizens of Paris. When Paris was attacked and besieged by the Franks in the fifth century, this ‘preserving deity of Paris’ is reputed having managed to slip away from the city in a boat and come back with twelve shiploads of food, collected by begging from other towns, for distribution among the starving Parisians. Nivedita was clearly drawn towards these paintings because they portrayed an idealism based on realistic stories.

Nivedita believed that it was through the medium of such civic paintings that the ‘national sense’ could be propagated all over the country most effectively: ‘I sometimes think that our greatest work in modernising India might be done through Art, instead of through the Press or the Universities. ... But it is Art as the Minister of the Civic Spirit—of the National Sense—of History. Not art immoral and anarchic—that we need. For this—we must go to France.’²⁰ Nivedita might have allowed her emotions to get the better of her in making such claims. But it does show her intense faith in civic paintings as promoters of the civic and national spirit.

It was for similar reasons that Nivedita admired the Jeanne d’Arc paintings of Louis-Maurice Boutet de Monvel. She admired Monvel’s presentation of Joan of Arc as the ‘National Spirit of France’ and the ‘Thunderbolt of God’. On the other hand, Nivedita detested those artists who depicted Joan of

Arc as ‘a pretty afternoon-tea and ballroom girl of the 19th Century or early 20th.’

It is not just the light, colour, shape, and texture of a painting that was important, it was the *idea* represented in it that interested Nivedita the most. And of ideas, the union between the human and the divine or between realism and idealism had a special appeal for her. In Jean François Millet’s ‘Angelus’ we ‘become aware, not of peasants at all, not of field nor hoe, nor even distant church, but of the far larger and greater truth of a Nation’s Labour sanctified by Prayer.’ According to Nivedita:



Angelus

This picture has always seemed to me to have a special message for the Modern Indian artist. For there is nothing here that did not come to Millet straight from nature. Everything in the sense is a reproduction from fact. Yet it is fact reproduced, not as by the photograph, but as by the poet, the seer. It is Nature and fact *interpreted* by the mind and the heart of a great man.

It is realism. True. But it is also idealism. Ah, is there no scene, no figure in India today, that deserves the love that would struggle till it, too, had been expressed as worthily as this?²¹

By ‘civic or national consciousness’ Nivedita did not, however, merely mean certain activities directed to the well-being of the people. So long as these activities remained mechanical in nature and did not inspire an expansion of consciousness in those for

whom they were meant, they could not go very far. According to her, it was because of lack of such basic goal orientation that people-oriented activities could not bring about a fundamental transformation in people: 'Why do all the dreams of our advanced friends—Socialist—Positivist—Reformer—what not—seem so lamentably gross? Ideals always to be a matter of water supply and sanitation and better distribution of wealth! ... No one ever discusses the *idea* which will bind together the future city. ... No one even asks what will be the characteristic *art* of the Ideal Period—and the Religion and Education do not even occur to the writer's mind.'²²

It was Nivedita's firm conviction that the masses could be empowered only by infusing higher ideals and a higher consciousness into their very being. Art, she opined, must be directed to the realization of this goal. Short of such consciousness, external measures to promote the well-being of people will be shorn of depth and be superficial in nature.

It would be relevant to point out that while Nivedita was all praise for 'Sainte Geneviève Watching over Paris', she was not fond of some of Puvis de Chavannes's other pictures. The 'Sacred Forest', for example, which adorned the walls of the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, was not to her liking. While appreciating the forms and colour effects of the composition, she felt that the painter had lost his sense of proportion in the portrayal of human characters. She thought that the artist's presentation of some characters in the nude was not well-conceived.

Nivedita was not fond of Western nude paintings. While she did not deny that even physicality could be presented in spiritually significant terms, she advised Indian artists against blind imitation of their Western counterparts and their style in this regard. 'High art' that advocated sensuous presentation was not her cup of tea. She could not subscribe to the view of art for art's sake and was firmly of the view that art must subserve civic, social, and national ends. After all, she argued, *man* was not an isolated being; on the contrary, he was, by all means, a social and spiritual being and therefore he must be accountable to his city, to his society, and to his nation

for his artistic creations. However prudish Nivedita might sound today, the relevance of her viewpoint on art, in the context of the particular need for national awakening in the India of her time, cannot be denied. Further, she was an Advaita Vedantist. So a higher ideal, with its spiritual significance, was more important to her than mere sensual satisfaction.

Nivedita suggested that, like the walls of the Pantheon in Paris, the walls of the Federation Hall in Calcutta²³ be also covered with civic and historical paintings of the type represented in 'Sainte Geneviève Watching over Paris'. As for the architecture of the Federation Hall, Nivedita suggested that it follow the architecture of Cave Nineteen of Ajanta, which in her opinion was 'one of the architectural triumphs of the world.'²⁴ Nivedita observed that the architectural richness of ancient India was such that India could be an example to the rest of the world and ruled out any 'borrowing' from the West in respect of the architecture of the proposed Federation Hall. Why should India ever desert the noble voice of her past for the hybrid models of Western architecture? She threw up this all-important question which demanded serious introspection.

(To be continued)

Notes and References

15. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1076.
16. 2.1075. Nivedita castigated as ethnocentrism of the worst order the European perception that it alone knew the truth about *art* and that the thoughts of other peoples on art were mere lapses from the ideal.
17. See 'The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality' in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 3.6.
18. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda*, 278.
19. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 3.6.
20. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.714–15.
21. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 3.87.
22. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.524.
23. The foundation stone of the Federation Hall was laid on 16 October 1905—the day the partition of Bengal came into effect—both as a protest against the partition and as a symbol indicating the partition could not destroy the unity in spirit that prevailed among the Bengalis on either side.
24. *Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 4.50.

Swami Vivekananda and Nikola Tesla: New Findings

Somenath Mukherjee

(Continued from the previous issue)

What Took Tesla To Vivekananda?

THE encounter between Tesla and Vivekananda has, primarily, two important aspects. One is its consequence, the other, no less important, is the reason which took Tesla to the Indian monk. We know that Tesla was an extremely busy man. In an interview in 1894 he had told a news reporter that 'I spend so many hours at my laboratory at times that my friends become alarmed and threaten to lock the place up and hide the key.'¹⁶ We can therefore surmise that Tesla had good reasons for visiting the swami.

In early 1896 Vivekananda was fairly well-known around the greater part of America. His role at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago and later his extensive lecture tours had endeared him to both the American people and the press. Besides, his visits to New York and its neighbouring areas since days before the parliament, and the lectures he gave during such visits, made him well-known among a section of New York's enlightened citizenry. In a letter published in the *Brahmavadin* of 11 April 1896 Helen F Huntington wrote: 'Swami Vivekananda has made many friends outside the circle of his followers; he has met all phases of society on equal terms of friendship and brotherhood; his classes and lectures have been attended by the most intellectual people and advanced thinkers of our cities; and his influence has already grown into a deep, strong undercurrent of spiritual awakening. ... He is altogether such a man as "kings delight to honour".'¹⁷

Therefore Tesla had reasons to be aware of the swami. Moreover, his indulging in a curiosity to attend the swami's lecture(s) was not impossible. And this curiosity might have been whetted by an article,

'The Ether', which the swami had written for the February 1895 number of the prestigious *New York Medical Times*. In its conclusion the article said: 'And thus we are forced to find that the ether ... cannot explain space because we cannot but think of ether as in space. And, therefore, if there is anything which will explain this space, it must be something that comprehends in its infinite being the infinite space itself. And what is there that can comprehend even the infinite space but the Infinite Mind?'¹⁸

That Nikola Tesla, prompted by his own interest, attended one or more of the swami's early 1896 New York lectures is a distinct possibility. But possibilities, however sound, always leave room for alternatives. And in this case, without more specific information at our disposal, we can never be sure whether Tesla's interest in Vivekananda preceded or succeeded the dinner at the Corbins'. But in whatever ways his interest ultimately steered him to Vivekananda, the swami's impact could never have grossly differed from that on Ella Wheeler Wilcox, the contemporary New York poet who wrote about her experience of meeting the swami:

He is so simple—so sincere, so pure, so unselfish. To have listened to him all winter is the greatest privilege life has ever offered me. ... His discourse this morning was most uplifting—his mere *presence* is that. His absolute sinking of *self* is what I like. I am so tired of people who place the capital 'I' before truth—and God. 'To do good for good's sake'—with no expectation or desire of reward, and never to speak of what we have done—but to keep on working for the love of doing God's work—is Vivekananda's grand philosophy of life.¹⁹

It would not be out of place here to note that even in those days when news moved slowly, India was not unaware of Nikola Tesla. *The Lahore Tribune* wrote on 21 September 1901: “Nikola Tesla will be the greatest name of the twentieth century.” With this prediction closes a paper in the *Humanitarian* on the Electrical Wizard of the West, which suggests grounds not a few for so daring a hope.²⁰ The *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, a Calcutta paper, wrote in its editorial of 25 October 1900: ‘*The Spectator* [an English newspaper] holds that an incalculable improvement would be effected in the conditions of British life if Mr Tesla’s method of transmitting electricity should prove practicable and should be adopted on a large scale in Great Britain’ (ibid.). Since India at that point of time was under British dominance, the *Amrita Bazar* had preferred to be suggestive and added: ‘Did Lord G Hamilton allude to Mr Tesla’s proposal when he said that electricity would save India? Surely it would, if it could be found that Mr Tesla’s ideas could be carried out practically’ (2.50).

But the most significant editorial was written earlier, on 16 September 1900, by the *Bengalee*, another Calcutta paper:

MR NIKOLA TESLA has contributed a rare paper in the *Century Magazine*. It is another effort to find a scientific basis for morality or religion and exactly answers the need of the hour ...

The system, elaborated by Mr Tesla, bears a striking resemblance to the searching investigation of the old Brahmans ...

To Nikola Tesla, science is the best revealer and the staunch ally of religion. He, like Patanjali, but unconsciously, repeats almost every word of Kapila, differing merely on the point of view from which he looks at the forces (2.54–5, note 11).

While writing this editorial, it appears, the *Bengalee*, or for that matter none in India, knew of the meeting which might have ultimately influenced Tesla’s ‘rare paper in the *Century Magazine*’.

Apart from Tesla’s getting due recognition in the English language newspapers of India, Ramanada Chatterjee’s *Prabasi*, an eminent Bengali periodical, had written about him in their *Agrahayan-Paush*

1308 BE (November–December 1901) issue, mentioning that ‘his name is as famous as Edison’s’.

Three Questions

On 8 February 1896, three days after the dinner at the Corbins, Nikola Tesla wrote to Vivekananda:

My dear Sir,

As it would be difficult to answer your questions by letter and as I wish to have the pleasure of meeting you again I would suggest a visit to my laboratory 45 East Houston Street any day next week you find convenient.

Faithfully yours

N Tesla²¹

This letter raises some obvious doubts. First, what were the questions that a sannyasin could possibly pose to a scientist of Tesla’s calibre? Second, when and where were these questions presented to Tesla? Was it during the dinner at the Corbins? If not, then how and when were those questions communicated? And third, why was Tesla so earnest in his invitation—he wrote: ‘I wish to have the pleasure of meeting you again’? Did the swami have a special significance for him?

An elusive suggestion is offered by Louise Burke: ‘One searches in vain, both through Swamiji’s lectures and writings and Nikola Tesla’s published papers, for a further reference to the mathematical demonstration that Swamiji had so hopefully looked forward to. It is highly probable that he met with disappointment’ (ibid.).

And later, after the swami had returned from his first visit to the West, he said in his lecture ‘The Vedanta’ in Lahore, on 12 November 1897: ‘There is the unity of force, Prana, there is the unity of matter, called Akasha. Is there any unity to be found among them again? Can they be melted into one? Our modern science is mute here, it has not yet found its way out.’²²

This, in a way, proves that Vivekananda did not get what he had expected from Nikola Tesla. But it hardly provides answers to the three queries above.

1896 123 460

Dear Sir -

If it be not asking you too much, will you kindly drop me a few lines giving me a list of the books on the latest theories about Conservation of Energy and the creation of the Cosmos? Is there any such theory in modern science that there is a sphere of electricity beyond the sphere of light? Are electric vibrations finer than those of light? Can the one be transferred to the other?

I would rather have a personal interview with you than a letter, yet I am afraid your time is so fully occupied. If however it be possible for you to grant me an interview it will be

124 461

a great kindness to me.

I wish but myself to say that you mention

With my thanks for last night's talk at Miss Corbin's

Yours truly
Vivekananda

In my researches on this issue I came across the following lead: 'After Tesla's death the custodian of alien property impounded his trunks, which held his papers, his diplomas and other honours, his letters, and his laboratory notes. These were eventually inherited by Tesla's nephew, Sava Kosanovich, and later housed in the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade.'²³

A Letter and a Telegram

I got in touch with the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade and the museum authorities were kind enough to provide digitized copies of two documents which have hitherto been unknown: (i) a letter with incomplete date which Vivekananda wrote to Tesla in 1896; and (ii) a telegram sent by Vivekananda to Nikola Tesla on 24 February 1896.²⁴

Let us first take a look at the letter:

1896

Dear Sir,

If it be not asking you too much will you kindly drop me a few lines giving me a list of the books on the latest theories about Conservation of Energy and the creation of the Cosmos?

Is there any such theory in modern science that there is a sphere of electricity beyond the sphere of light?

Are electric vibrations finer than those of light? Can the one be transferred to the other?

I would rather have a personal interview with you than a letter, yet I am afraid your time is so fully [?] occupied.

If however it be possible for you to grant me an interview it will be a great kindness to me.

I will suit myself to any time you mention

With many thanks for last night's talk at Miss Corbin's

I remain yours flly
Vivekananda²⁵

The depth of thought behind this letter deserves a deep analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article. So we shall proceed with our historical research. The letter has the year of writing, not the date, but we can easily derive the same from its last line: 'With my thanks for last night's talk at Miss Corbin's.' The letter, therefore, was written on 6 February 1896. This also proves that Tesla's letter of 8 February was a reply to this mail. The first two questions thus stand answered. And we should be getting the answer to the third question too shortly.

To find out what happened to the swami's proposed visit to Tesla's laboratory, we need to look at the telegram dated 24 February 1896:

THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY
RECEIVED at the WESTERN UNION BUILDING,
195 Broadway, N. Y. feb 24 1896.

Dated—Hotel Normandie NY 24

To—Mr. Testa [sic]

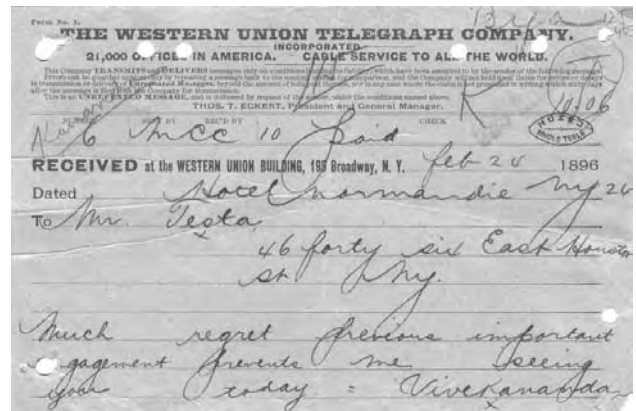
46 forty six East Houston St NY [In Tesla's letter
his address was mentioned as 45 East Houston St]

Much regret previous important engagement pre-
vents me seeing you today = Vivekananda.²⁶

In his letter of 13 February Vivekananda had written: 'I am to go and see him [Tesla] next week'. We know that 13 February was a Thursday. Hence, his 'next week' started on Monday 17 and ended on Sunday 23. And as he was unable to keep the appointment on 24 February, the possibility of their having met the previous week can easily be ruled out. Vivekananda arrived in Detroit on 3 March 1896. So he actually had only about ten days more to have his appointment rescheduled. Till date, however, we have nothing to suggest that this did actually happen.

Even if he did get to visit Tesla, it is unlikely that the scientist, or for that matter contemporary science in those days, was in a position to prove mathematically what the swami had realized through Vedanta. In 1895, even a whole year before he met Tesla, in his London lecture on 'The Real Nature of Man' Vivekananda had firmly asserted that: 'It is possible to demonstrate that what we call matter does not exist at all. It is only a certain state of force. Solidity, hardness, or any other state of matter can be proved to be the result of motion. Increase of vortex motion imparted to fluids gives them the force of solids. A mass of air in vortex motion, as in a tornado, becomes solid-like and by its impact breaks or cuts through solids.'²⁷

Tesla seems to have remained a staunch believer in matter-energy duality. Even as late as 1938 he was asserting: 'There is no energy in matter other than that received from the environment; ... [this] applies rigorously to molecules and atoms as well as to the largest heavenly bodies, and to all matter in the



universe in any phase of its existence from its very formation to its ultimate disintegration.'²⁸

An Affirmation that Changed Science

Exactly three years after the swami's demise, a twenty-six-year-old youth from a middle class Jewish family at Ulm, Bavaria, wrote a thirty-page paper with the title 'On the Electro-dynamics of Moving Bodies' for the German journal *Annalen der Physik*. At that time this nondescript youth was serving as a minor official in the Swiss patent office. His name was Albert Einstein. This paper outlined his Special Theory of Relativity. Ten years later he came up with the General Theory of Relativity; and, as the cliché goes, the world could never be the same again. Through his famous equation $E = mc^2$, Einstein demonstrated that energy and mass are equivalent entities, differing only in their physical state. Mass is actually concentrated energy.

The world took its time to assimilate what Einstein had come up with. Tesla also took his time to assimilate what he heard from the Indian monk. Around 1907 he observed:

There manifests itself in the fully developed being, Man, a desire mysterious, inscrutable and irresistible: to imitate nature, to create, to work himself the wonders he perceives. Long ago he recognized that all perceptible matter comes from a primary substance, or tenuity beyond conception, filling all space, the Akasa or luminiferous ether, which is acted upon by the life giving Prana or creative force, calling into existence, in never ending cycles all things and phenomena. The primary substance, thrown into infinitesimal whirls of prodigious

velocity, becomes gross matter; the force subsiding, the motion ceases and matter disappears, reverting to the primary substance.²⁹

To find out the real significance behind these lines, let us go back to the Concert Hall at the Madison Square Garden in New York. The day was 16 February 1896, and one of the greatest scientific minds the world has ever known was probably listening to a lecture ‘The Real and the Apparent Man,’ wherein Vivekananda said:

We have not yet found that one, by knowing which everything else will be known. We have resolved the whole universe into two components, into what are called matter and energy, or what the ancient philosophers of India called Akasha and Prana. The next step is to resolve this Akasha and the Prana into their origin. Both can be resolved into the still higher entity which is called mind. It is out of mind, the Mahat, the universally existing thought-power, that these two have been produced. Thought is a still finer manifestation of being than either Akasha or Prana. It is thought that splits itself into these two. The universal thought existed in the beginning, and that manifested, changed, evolved itself into these two Akasha and Prana: and by the combination of these two the whole universe has been produced.³⁰

The swami would hardly have been surprised at seeing Tesla recourse to Vedantic truth. In 1897 he said at Kumbakonam: ‘It seems to us, and to all who care to know, that the conclusions of modern science are the very conclusions of the Vedanta reached ages ago; only, in modern science they are written in the language of matter’ (3.185).

Deeper Connotations

Before concluding let us look at the remarkable roles played by these two brilliant men in one of history’s great events: the commemoration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s reaching America. One had illuminated the World’s Fair, officially known as the Columbian Exposition, with his electricity. The other had illumined the

hearts of his listeners with truth imbibed through Vedanta at the Parliament of Religions, which was a part of the exposition.

The immensity of the World’s Fair has been thus described:

The Fair was supposed to open in 1892, the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the continent. It was dedicated on October 21, 1892, but actually opened on May 1, 1893. ‘Over its 179-day run, attendance at the fair totaled 27,529,400, or more than one hundred fifty thousand people a day ... even after multiple visits were accounted for, it was estimated that about twelve million people took part—this in a nation with a total population of about sixty-three million.’ ...

The fair had given bigness a new meaning. To see everything in the fair, even in a hurried manner, a visitor had to spend about 3 weeks and walk 150 miles.³¹

And about the illuminative role played by Nikola Tesla in this mammoth arrangement, the biography of George Westinghouse says:

The best result of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 was that it removed the last serious doubt of the usefulness to mankind of the polyphase alternating current. The conclusive demonstration at Niagara was yet to be made, but the World’s Fair clinched the fact that it would be made, and so it marked an epoch in industrial history. Very few of those who looked at this machinery, who gazed with admiration at the great switchboard, so ingenious and complete, and who saw the beautiful lighting effects could have realized that they were living in an historical moment, that they were looking at the beginning of a revolution.³²

Representatives from different religions around the globe had come to the Parliament of Religions to expound their respective faiths; and Vivekananda was one of these august representatives. The *Critic* of 7 October 1893 noted: ‘No one expressed so well the spirit of the parliament, its limitations and its finest influence, as did the Hindoo monk.’³³ Margaret Elizabeth Noble, better known as Sister Nivedita, later elaborated:


To the heart of this speaker, none was foreign or alien. For him, there existed only Humanity and Truth. ... As he spoke, in the youth and noonday of the West, a nation, sleeping in the shadows of the darkened half of earth, on the far side of the Pacific, waited in spirit for the words that would be borne on the dawn that was travelling towards them, to reveal to them the secret of their own greatness and strength.³⁴

Both these exceptional men added catholicity to their respective vocations—religion and science. On 27 September 1893, during the last session of the parliament, Vivekananda said: ‘If anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: “Help and not Fight”, “Assimilation and not Destruction”, “Harmony and Peace and not Dissension”’ (1.24). And Nikola Tesla was probably expressing a heart-felt belief when he said: ‘Science is but a perversion of itself unless it has as its ultimate goal the betterment of humanity.’³⁵

The time was ripe for these two personalities to meet. In his London lecture ‘The Absolute and Manifestation’, Vivekananda had prophesied: ‘Science and religion will meet and shake hands. ... The Hindu nation proceeded through the study of the mind, through metaphysics and logic. The European nations start from external nature, and now they too are coming to the same results.’³⁶

A hundred and twelve years have elapsed since that lecture; and if we strive hard we may, perhaps, feel the echoes of that intense urge that a young monk had for a mathematical interpretation of the truth he intuited in his heart. In 1933 Albert Einstein, while expressing his own feelings in a lecture ‘Origins of the General Theory of Relativity’ at the University of Glasgow, had echoed the feelings of that monk: ‘The years of searching in the dark for a truth that one feels, but cannot express; the intense desire and the alterations of confidence and misgiving, until one breaks through to clarity and

understanding, are only known to him who himself experienced them.’³⁷

His contemporary scientists were not ready to quench Vivekananda’s thirst. Prophets are always much ahead of their time, and Vivekananda was no exception. 

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Towards Humanitarian Development

Brahmachari Ajitachaitanya

(Continued from the previous issue)

Core Aspects of Humanitarian Development

THE central feature of development is the expansion of alternatives from which people can choose. Efforts undertaken to expand people's capacity to pursue their desired objectives lie at the core of development. Humanitarian development is essentially a 'people-centred' approach, and puts human agency at centre stage. It deals with the opportunities people have for improving their quality of life. It is particularly concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policies. Basic education, good health, and other human attainments are not only valuable as constituent elements of the quality of life, but also help in generating higher economic standards, which in turn can contribute to enhancing human freedom.

Education • Education is one of the important determinants of the Human Development Index of a country. Education provides society the foundation for development because it is critical to improving health, nutrition, and productivity. Mass education is a necessary condition for economic development. In the eradication of social evils arising from prejudice and superstition, dogmatism and fanaticism, no other instrument is more effective than mass basic education. It is also essential for building up productive efficiency. Swamiji saw education as the panacea for all social evils. He considered education the most important instrument for promoting self-reliance and activism for growth, development, and prosperity.

Much of the population of rural India has not yet been able to rise above subsistence levels, despite hard labour, due to lack of proper education or specialized skills. Amartya Sen points out that

spread of education among the masses is important since 'literacy is an essential tool of self-defence in a society where social interactions include the written media.'²² Moreover, Sen considers basic education as a catalyst for social change (*ibid.*).

'If the mountain cannot come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain.' Swamiji cited this proverb to suggest that for those who cannot attend school, education should be imparted at their workplace.²³ He conceived a massive educational venture and wrote in a letter: 'A hundred thousand men and women, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion's courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising-up—the gospel of equality' (5.15). Present-day economists and policy-makers are pursuing the same methods.

Health Care • Health is another important constitutive element of a nation's well-being. But health care services have been one of the most neglected aspects of India's development programme. The neglect of health services is clearly reflected in the abysmally low public expenditure on health—around 0.8 % of the GDP.²⁴ Contemporary economists note that the low level of public expenditure on health is aggravated by: (i) highly inefficient use of available resources, and (ii) sharp inequalities in access to health care based on class, caste, gender, place of residence, and similar factors. Swamiji was of the view that 'impure food and impure water are the chief causes of all physical maladies.'²⁵ He repeatedly exhorted his countrymen to take proper

steps to remove these two evils. He also wanted medical relief to be given to the poor whenever occasion demanded and worked to this end, as stated earlier.

Gender Inequality • Another particularly serious problem that hinders India's development is the inequality between men and women with respect to accessible rights. In most parts of the country women, in comparison to men, tend to fare quite badly in matters such as education, opportunity to develop talents, nutrition, health, and employment. That discrimination against women starts prenatally is reflected in the skewed gender ratio in many Indian states. In this context Swami Vivekananda reiterated the importance of women's development for a nation to grow. He emphatically stated that dishonouring the womenfolk was the reason why India was 'the weakest and most backward of all countries' (7.484). Moreover, 'the best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women' (8.198). Women can largely influence and mould the future generations and thereby the fate of the country. Swamiji wanted women to be well-educated, free, and equipped to solve their own problems and participate as equals in the economic life of the nation (5.230–2; 342–3; 6.115, 493). Sister Nivedita, an Irish lady, undertook a women's education programme in India under the specific direction of Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji's statements on the uplift of women are of relevance in the present context as well. He warned: 'There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing' (6.328). Women represent half the resources and potential in any community; so efforts to promote equality of rights among men and women are essential for the overall development of human society.

Democracy • The form of government that a nation has also influences its development. A government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' is the basis of all democratic ideals. While democratic institutions provide opportunities for achieving democratic ideals, how these opportuni-

ties are realized is a matter of democratic practice. Therefore, democratic ideals, institutions, and practices are simultaneously necessary for the proper development of a nation—Swami Vivekananda has upheld this view, as we will see in brief.

Corruption at different levels of civic administration and public life is the major challenge that democratic practice faces in India. Felix Raj reports that according to the Transparency International Survey 2002, 'Indians pay a whopping Rs 267 billion in bribes annually, with the health sector as the most corrupt.'²⁶ The 'Approach Paper to the Tenth Five Year Plan', issued by the Government of India, reports that 'today 60 out of Rs 100 in wage schemes is reserved for wages, but it has been reported that in some states only Rs 10 to 15 actually goes to the poor worker, the rest is illegal income for bureaucracy, contractors and politicians.'²⁷ Swami Vivekananda's voice, more than a century ago, strikes us as a timeless call: 'We may convert every house in the country into a charity asylum, we may fill the land with hospitals but the misery of man will still continue to exist until man's character changes.'²⁸ With his profound insight Swamiji pointed to this negative aspect of democracy. Prof. Sankari Prasad Basu writes: "'Vote and ballot give the people some sort of opportunity to express themselves," Vivekananda agreed, but within the system, infiltrated horrible corruption and abominably mean power tussle.'²⁹ On the corruption of democratic practices that he saw in the capitalist countries of the West, Swamiji wrote: 'They that have money have kept the government of the land under their thumb, are robbing the people and sending them as soldiers to fight and be slain on foreign shores, so that, in case of victory, their coffers may be full of gold bought by the blood of the subject-people on the field of the battle. And the subject-people? Well, theirs is only to shed their blood.'³⁰

United Nations Development Programme and Swami Vivekananda's Approach

In September 2000 the world's leaders gathered at the UN Millennium Summit to commit their

Millennium Development Goals

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Achieve gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

—United Nations Development Program,
Human Development Report 2002, 17

nations to strengthening global efforts for peace, human rights, democracy, strong governance, environmental sustainability, and poverty eradication, and also to promoting principles of human dignity, equality, and equity. The resulting Millennium Declaration, adopted by 189 countries, includes a collective urgent commitment to overcome poverty which still grips much of the globe. At the 2000 summit the UN General Assembly asked the UN Secretary General to prepare a road map for achieving the commitments—resulting in the Millennium Development Goals, which address many of the most enduring failures of human development.

These Millennium Development Goals have striking similarities with Swami Vivekananda's thought—(i) a vital commitment to promoting human well-being and, (ii) an effort to address the failures of human development. It would therefore be worthwhile to study these contemporary goals from the perspective of Swamiji's economic thought.

The concept of economic development is presently undergoing a thorough change. What has been learnt about development in the last fifty years is that there is no once-for-all solution to the problems of underdevelopment.³¹ Human wel-

fare has become the central theme of development in recent years. In fact, human development is at the centre stage of the Millennium Development Goals. India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, a noted economist, believes that 'human resource development is the key to success in the world economy now on the horizon'.³² Swami Vivekananda's message of 'man-making' has a striking resemblance to this stand. He emphasized that the individual ought to be the unit of development. He laid stress on making the 'man' first, developing the 'individual', manifesting one's own potential. Current views of development are also based on this concept of the 'individual'.

More importantly, in Swami Vivekananda's conception the human being occupies the central place in an all-round development, instead of being a mere means of development. Amartya Sen in his recent study on India called for a "people-centred" approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets and governments) at the centre of the stage.³³ 'People's empowerment', the popular expression used by present-day economic thinkers, is coterminous with 'man-making' as used by Swamiji. Empowerment and development are closely interlinked. Empowerment leads to development, which in turn leads to greater empowerment.

It is indeed amazing to note how, in the days of rampant imperialism, Swami Vivekananda rightly perceived that in the future development goals would be human-centric. More and better food, good housing, safe drinking water, eradication of diseases, provision of public health facilities, and education help reduce poverty by increasing opportunities to generate income. Expenditures on the provision of these aforesaid facilities are productive, so they should be treated as investments.

Interventions for Achieving Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals present the world with daunting challenges. Unless there is a radical improvement, too many countries will miss

the targets. Yet today the world has an unprecedented opportunity to deliver on the commitment. For the first time in history there is a genuine consensus among all countries that poverty, disease, hunger, and lack of education are fundamental global problems. Only efforts are to be properly resourced and services distributed more fairly and efficiently.³⁵

Swami Vivekananda conceived of the idea of development, its need and importance, in all its facets. Though he did not work out the details systematically, there is sufficient proof of his deep insight into the problem of development. We shall now study his thoughts in the context of the six policy clusters that have been framed at the UN Development Summit for achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

i) Early and ambitious investment in basic education • The poorest countries need to spend more on education to escape their poverty trap, but ironically they do not have enough resources to make such basic investment. According to Swamiji knowledge is one of the most important determinants of development. He wanted the power of ideas to be manifested and said that ‘intellectual power is the force’.³⁶ Education would make the rural and deprived masses conscious of their present state and equip them with the ways and means for changing their condition. Basic education helps in the eradication of social evils prevailing among the common masses. Swamiji considered education as the panacea for all social evils.

ii) Increase in the productivity of small farmers in unfavourable environments • The poor condition of agriculture in India is the root cause of general poverty. Therefore, a significant growth in agricultural produce is essential for the removal of poverty. Swamiji emphasized the application of scientific techniques in agriculture for raising productivity.³⁷ Unfortunately, ever since independence, India has largely equated development with industrialization. According to C Rangarajan we have seriously underestimated the role of the agricultural sector in reducing poverty, in employment genera-

tion, and in a more broad-based growth.³⁸ Swami Vivekananda wanted that agriculture should be given proper place in India’s economy, and modern method of cultivation should be used for increasing productivity.³⁹

Primary education is one of the most important instruments available to increase productivity in agriculture. Swamiji wanted farmers to be equipped with scientific techniques of agriculture, and this is not possible unless the farmers have a minimum level of education.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, a significant proportion of Indian farmers continue to be illiterate.

iii) Development of an industrial policy that nurtures entrepreneurial activity • ‘The tremendous engine of competition will destroy everything. If you are to live at all, you must adjust yourself to the times. If we are to live at all, we must be a scientific nation’ (6.113). Swamiji clearly understood the need of this age and put forward the idea of industrializing India. He perceived that to emerge as a developed country India must master Western science and technology and apply them to the material advancement of the country. He said, ‘it would be to India’s profit if its people could have some of America’s industrial advancement and civilization’ (9.472).

Here is an extract from a report of Swamiji’s speech at a parlour meeting before the Chicago Parliament of Religions: ‘The speaker (Swami Vivekananda) explained his mission in his country to be to organize monks for industrial progress that they might give the people the benefit of the industrial education and thus elevate them and improve their condition.’⁴¹

He further said, ‘we want an enterprising spirit’⁴²; ‘capacity for work and self-reliance’ (7.148). For him ‘the energy and co-operation of the whole nation was necessary, if material prosperity was ever to be brought back to India.’⁴³ It is probably due to this practical and modern outlook that the renowned sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar said: ‘Vivekananda was the father of modern materialism in India.’⁴⁴

Innovation is the main propellant of economic development and Swamiji wanted people to apply their knowledge and skills to innovate new products and procedures. He observed, 'Modern education has changed your fashion; but new avenues of wealth lie yet undiscovered for want of the inventive genius.'⁴⁵

iv) Promote democratic governance and human rights • The reason for India's present condition is that knowledge, wealth, and political power remains accumulated in the hands of a few who refuse to share them with the masses. Swamiji called for a privilege-free society. He believed that the principle of 'unity in diversity' is built into nature and realized that variety ought to be preserved without its negative overtones. What needs to be abolished is the 'privilege' wrongly associated with difference in talents and attainments. He strongly condemned privilege-mongering: 'The difficulty is not that one body of men are naturally more intelligent than another, but whether this body of men, because they have the intelligence, should take away even physical enjoyments from those who do not possess that advantage. The fight is to destroy that privilege' (1.435).

Human Development as Atmavikasa

Swami Ranganathananda has pointed out that through the message of Vedanta Swami Vivekananda gave us 'the opportunity to understand religion as the science of human development, as the grand science of the inner nature of man, as the science of human possibilities, bereft of all these cheap and weakening elements, and recognize its unique contribution to the qualitative enrichment of human life.'⁴⁶ For achieving human development, true to the meaning of the term, we need to combine secular and political education with spiritual education. All these three constitute the fullest human development—*atmavikasa*. Secular and political education result in partial development, which may achieve good short-term results, but will be counter productive in the long run. Thus, 'a free, self-regulating, egalitarian, and peaceful soci-

ety will emerge only when a little ethical and spiritual value will spontaneously rise from the depth of the human spirit and irrigate man's personal and social life' (97).

In Swami Vivekananda we find a down-to-earth approach because he could realize, by his direct contact with human suffering, the need of a multi-dimensional humanistic approach to solve our problems. He urges us to turn deep inside and apprehend the essential human being. Humanism is attainable only when this 'essence' within is discovered. Only then can we have a common brotherhood, which would form the basis of social and gender equality irrespective of all other distinctions. Moreover, it would also help the masses to derive inner strength and achieve a sense of personal dignity, *atma-shraddha*.

Hence Swamiji preached the universal message of Vedanta, which says that infinite strength is in every person, in one's own true Self, the Atman: 'Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come, when this sleeping soul [of man] is roused to self-conscious activity.'⁴⁷

Service and Ethics: Today's Needs


Ethics and service are interrelated entities. Ethics asks people to detach themselves from their physical self and view the social environment as it actually is. Ethics comes to us with a great message, the message of interdependence, the message of mutual service. In the context of democracy, we are required to practise and treat every human being as an end in itself. When this is done, human relationships become transformed, revealing a new human dimension—the spiritual dimension. Swami Ranganathananda defines service as the 'finest form of inter-human relationship.'⁴⁸

Swami Vivekananda gave a new orientation to the concept of service through this Vedantic paradigm. The general belief is that service is the result of an attitude of compassion, but Vedanta

insists that the same Atman dwells in all, and that service to any being is a spiritual discipline. As Swamiji said, 'You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege.'⁴⁹ If this concept is introduced in our daily work, its effectiveness would be greatly enhanced. The concept of service as worship is a dire need in India; it will help remove corruption and inequality, the first step to achieve the much desired overall development of the nation.

Swami Vivekananda had first-hand knowledge of India's economic problems. This knowledge sprang as much from his direct experience as from a deep insight into human nature and affairs. He envisaged that religion will play a major role in the economic development of India and hoped that the philosophy of karma yoga, as propounded in the Gita, would inspire Indians into dynamic action, radical reforms, growth, and development. Swamiji's ideas encompassed all the major aspects of India's economic problems. But the most important factor that distinguishes him from many economists is his humanism, present at the root of all his social and economic thought. His love for humanity at large makes his theories universal, not confined to any particular place or people.

Let us conclude with an optimistic note that poured out from the depths of Swamiji's heart:

The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awaking and a voice is coming to us—away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there, reflected as it were from peak to peak of the infinite Himalaya of knowledge, and of love, and of work, India, this motherland of ours—a voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in its utterances, and is gaining volumes as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening! (3.145–6). 

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Girish and Sri Sarada Devi

Swami Chetanananda

DURING Ramakrishna's lifetime Girish-chandra Ghosh publicly declared him to be an avatara. As for Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Girish held her in high esteem as the wife of his guru and cherished great respect for her. One day he was pacing back and forth on the roof of his house with his second wife when Holy Mother was on the roof of Balaram's house nearby. Girish's wife noticed her and said to him, 'Look, there is the Mother walking on that terrace.' Girish at once turned his face away and replied: 'No, no. I have sinful eyes. I won't look at her that way; I cannot be a sneak.'¹ Immediately he went downstairs.

It is said that the exceptional good fortune of his second wife brought Girish his fame, his wealth, and the grace of the Master. Girish and his second wife had three children—two girls and a boy. When his son was born, his wife became very ill. Girish arranged her treatment, which continued for a year. But finally she died on 26 December 1888. Grief-stricken, Girish tried to occupy himself by studying mathematics and caring for his little son. Girish had once asked the Master to be born as his son, so he believed that his boy was Ramakrishna reincarnated. He served the boy wholeheartedly. He bought for him new clothes, cups, glasses, and plates; and he did not allow anyone else to use those things. Holy Mother always took the boy on her lap whenever she met him.

In 1890 Holy Mother was staying at Sourindra Thakur's house at Baranagar. Girish was still grieving for his wife, and Swami Niranjanananda knew this. He insisted that Girish visit the Mother. Girish paid his first visit to Holy Mother at Baranagar with his three-year-old son. The little boy could not speak at that time and expressed himself through inarticulate sounds and gestures. He had seen

Holy Mother before. Anxiously he pointed at the upper floor where the Mother lived and simply said: 'Ooh! Ooh?' An attendant of the Mother took him upstairs and he rolled on the ground before her. Presently he came down and began to pull at his father's hand. Girish burst out crying and said: 'How can I go to the Mother? I am a great sinner.' The boy would not leave him alone. Finally he took his son in his arms and climbed the stairs, his body trembling and tears flowing from his eyes. Finally he fell flat at the Mother's feet and said: 'It is through him that I have seen your sacred feet' (272). The boy died not long afterwards.

In his early life Girish tried to use alcohol to relieve the grief caused by his first wife's death. Now he was determined to use divine intoxication to relieve the loss of his second wife and his son.

Kumud Bandhu Sen wrote in his reminiscences: 'Whenever Girish Ghosh referred to Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, his manner of expression was extraordinarily superb and different from that of the other devotees. His deep reverence for and strong faith in their divinity and unbounded grace were expressed in his utterances and he inspired those who happened to listen to him. He told me one day, long after, that at first he and other lay devotees of Sri Ramakrishna could not recognize the greatness of the Holy Mother: "We used to pay our respectful tribute to her as the spiritual consort of our Master. We looked upon him alone as our guide, friend, father, and mother—all combined. It was Niranjan (Swami Niranjanananda) who opened my eyes. In the midst of the grim tragedies of life, stricken with grief and sorrow, I felt for a time quite perplexed and could not console my disturbed mind. During my sad bereavement, Niranjan came to me often and tried

to divert my mind by his spiritual talk. One day I told him, 'Brother Niranjan, it is a pity that I cannot now see Sri Ramakrishna, who is my shelter, my only refuge.' Niranjan interrupted me, saying, 'Why! Mother is there. Is there any difference between Thakur [the Master] and Mā? Can you imagine Narayana without Lakshmi, Shiva without Pārvati, Rama without Sita, and Krishna without Rādhā or Rukmini?' I was taken aback. I told him, 'What do you say—Thakur and Mother are one and the same?' Niranjan replied, 'Well, you believe that Sri Ramakrishna is an Avatara, God incarnate in human form. Do you mean to say that he took an ordinary woman (*jīva*) as his spiritual partner in his divine life? You must remember the words of our Master, "Brahman and Shakti are one and the same—though in manifestation they appear to us as two". Mother is Shakti, the Shakti of Purna-Brahma Ramakrishna.' His utterances cleared my vision and I could at once recognize the Divine Mother—the Mother of the Universe—incarnated as the Holy Mother for the salvation of mankind. I felt a strong urge to go to Jayrambati and see our Holy Mother, who alone could wipe away my tears and remove my sorrow in my dire calamities. Niranjan approved of my suggestion and voluntarily offered to accompany me there. But Balaram Bose vehemently opposed this proposal, as he did not like that I should disturb the Holy Mother with my worldly problems and miseries. At that time, Swami Vivekananda was away from Calcutta and the matter was referred to him by Niranjan. Getting his approval we started for Jayrambati. I could hardly express my joy when I first went to Kamarpukur—to me the cottage where Sri Ramakrishna was born seemed a Rishi's holy hermitage; the scenery and its surrounding environment were enchanting. Thence we proceeded to Jayrambati. There, during my stay, I directly asked the Mother, 'Well, Mā, are you my real mother or a mother as though adopted?' The Mother said, 'Yes, I am your real mother.'" Further, Girish Ghosh told us in forceful language, pregnant with deep emotion, "Yes, Mother—the Divine Mother—has appeared as a poor village girl, living

in a remote hamlet, away from the din and bustle of a town where life reflects only the formal and artificial ways of worldly-wise and sophisticated men and women. I did not ask for anything from Mother. As soon as I went to her all my sorrow and misery vanished completely and I felt a supreme serenity of mind which I had never experienced before. Oh! Those days were spent in heavenly bliss and joy."

'One day, at the Mother's place at Jayrambati, a beggar [Haridas Vairagi of Deshra] came and sang a Bengali song, to the accompaniment of violin. A free English rendering of the song is given below:

O Mother Umā, what glad tidings there are!
I hear from people, O Mother; tell me the truth,
Shivāni.
Is your name Annapurna in the holy city of
Kāshi?
O Aparna, when I delivered you in marriage to
Bholānāth,
He was then a beggar for a morsel of food.
O Shubhankari, what happy news I hear today!
You are now the Goddess of the Universe, seated
on the left of the God of the Universe.
My Digambar was called mad, a queer fellow;
I then suffered humiliation and opprobrium
from the public as well as from my own
people at home.
Now I learn there are guards at the gate of the
palace of Digambar,
And even Indra, Chandra, and Yama cannot see
Him.
I believe you are enriched now;
Otherwise why is Gauri so vain
That she does not care to see her child with her
eyes,
And turns her face away at the mention of
Rādhika's name?

'When the beggar finished singing the song, Girish Ghosh, Swami Niranjanananda, and others who heard it could not restrain their tears. The Mother too, with all her women companions, was shedding tears. It recalled the story of the early life of the Holy Mother, when Sri Ramakrishna was often referred to as the "mad son-in-law" by the people of Jayrambati and its neighbourhood, when

her own parents repented giving her in marriage to Sri Ramakrishna and her neighbours pitied her and expressed sorrow at her “miserable” fate. She did not and could not then protest, and she humbly suffered all those humiliating remarks, in silence, though she knew in her innermost heart that her husband was a God-intoxicated man, far above ordinary people. She then tasted divine bliss whenever she came in contact with him. She did not go to anybody’s house and she never attended any social function lest people should pass humiliating remarks against her husband and blame it on her ill luck. Now that Sri Ramakrishna is revered as a prophet and an Avatara and is worshipped in many places, people come to her for her *darśan* even in that remote village which is situated in an out-of-the-way place. The Holy Mother is now regarded by many devotees as the Mother of the Universe.

‘The song drew tears from the eyes of the audience as it aptly applied to and conjured up a vision of the early life of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Saradamani Devi (the Holy Mother). I heard from Girish Ghosh that for over an hour all remained spell-bound and their eyes glistened with tears.’²

Kumud Bandhu Sen recalled another occasion: ‘The happy days came to an end. After Kāli Puja, we heard that Mother was leaving for Jayrambati. On the day of her departure Girish Ghosh came to bid her farewell. He did not utter anything, and with a serious countenance he called Yogananda and went direct to the Holy Mother. We all followed him. Full of emotion and deep reverence, he prostrated at the feet of the Holy Mother and with folded hands said, “Mother, when I come to you I think that I am a *little* child coming to its own mother. Had I been a ‘grown-up’ son, then I would have served my mother. But it is quite the opposite; you serve us and we do not serve you. You are going to Jayrambati to serve the people, even by cooking food for others in that village-kitchen. How can I serve you, and what do I know about service of the Divine Mother?” His voice was choked and his whole face was red with emotion. He again said, “Mother, you know our minds, which we ourselves do not know.

We cannot go to you. It is through your mercy and kindness that you come here to see your children. Whenever you wish to come here, please do not hesitate for a moment and we, your children, will always be happy to see our Mother and shall deem it a privilege to render you whatever service you will graciously allow us to do.” He then addressed us who were standing behind him: “It is difficult for human beings to believe that God may incarnate in a human form like any of us. Can you realize that you are standing before the Mother of the Universe in the form of a village woman? Can you imagine the Divine Mother doing all kinds of domestic and social duties like any ordinary woman? Yet she is the Mother of the Universe—*mahā-māyā*, *mahā-śakti*—appearing on earth for the salvation of all creatures and at the same time to exemplify the ideal of true motherhood.” His utterances made a deep impression on all present and the whole atmosphere was charged with serene sublimity and calmness. Yes, it was then a veritable paradise, pervaded with spiritual bliss and benediction. We accompanied the Mother to the railway station. She blessed us all as we touched her feet in salutation’ (265).

(To be continued)

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1. Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963) 271–2.
2. Kumud Bandhu Sen, ‘Reminiscences of the Holy Mother’, *Prabuddha Bharata*, 57/6 (June 1952), 263–4.

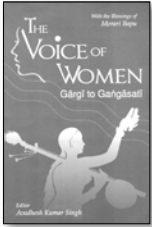
(Continued from page 235)

Good moral values are the strong foundations of each child, the source of a positive and fulfilled life. All mothers—whether they are working or not—need to give emphasis on the upbringing of their offspring. Children ought to be taught the true goal of life as human beings. They should learn to utilize their human birth to fulfil their worldly as well as spiritual duties. After all, we owe much to society—a debt that we ought to redeem—and to the Divine who is our inner self and is to be realized in this very life.



REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
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The Voice of Women: Gārgī to Ga gāsati

Ed. Avadhesh Kumar Singh

D K Printworld, 'Sri Kunj', F-52, Bali Nagar, Ramesh Nagar Metro Station, New Delhi 110 015. 2008. xii + 314 pp. Rs 550.

The voice of the Indian woman was silenced only after the Islamic spread into India via Sindh. She may have faced untold miseries, but she could lash out in public and there was no way man could defend himself. Remember how Draupadi questioned the wrong-doings of the males in the Kuru assembly and even the venerable Bhishma evaded a direct answer: 'The course of morality is subtle. Even the illustrious wise in this world fail to understand it always.' After some more hedging he simply says he is unable to answer her! In later days also, the Indian woman has managed to verbalize her emotions *sub rosa*, revealing her inner strength. Her voice can yet light the way to the future, believes Morari Bapu who has not been able to reconcile himself to the second banishment of Sita. Just the words of a washerman against the Agni-tested queen of Ayodhya? His discourse, which comes as an afterword, is a quiverful of inexplicables, but enough seeps through when he says that it is woman as mother who sacrifices all. This *tyaga* gives a unique *tejas*, sheerly beautiful, like the brightness one saw in the face of Kasturba Gandhi. Rightly so, for who in the Gandhian movement, including Gandhi himself, had sacrificed as much as Kasturba?

As the editor, Avadhesh Kumar Singh has had to carry a heavy burden with such a variedly-written set of essays on women saint-writers. Perhaps he had no good help for the various languages, and this has led to chaotic spellings and references. His own introduction is marred by the paragraph on the Tamil Alvars. It is hard not to sigh when reading Tilappan for Tiruppan, Mayong for Poykai, Todar Dippodo Alvar for Tondar Adippodi Alvar.

Nagindas Sanghavi finds that the bhakti movement itself was a backlash against the ways of priests

and pandits, who sought to bind everyone in ritualism and compartmentalize the people in terms of gender and caste. But when woman took to the path of bhakti, she was not easily released from social norms. Often she had to walk away from her familial ties. However, trying to generalize about women bhakti poets indulging in sexual fantasies is hard to accept. To hold the lives of saints like Mira and Andal as 'a negation of all the ideals of Hindu society as summed up in the life of Sita and Savitri' is laughable. These poetesses had nothing against the classical heroines or the traditional way of life. It was just that they preferred to pursue the path of bhakti. Mahadevi's going around nude is not a defiance of traditional ways but a rejection of men's concupiscence. Nagindas becomes quite tiresome with his insistence on the sexual fantasy idea. He could have utilized better the space given him if he had studied the poems as devotional poems and not as Internet erotica.

Among other essayists, Meena Talim, speaking on the *Therigatha* rightly says that the Buddhist nuns were engaged in self-realization and not given to ecstasy-oriented devotion. There are informative as well as insightful essays on Rabia Basri, Mahadevi Akka, and Lal Ded among others. Madhabi Dasi, the first Vaishnava poetess from Orissa who was a contemporary of Sri Chaitanya, comes to life in an exhaustive essay by Sulochana Das. We could not have asked for a better essayist than Indra Nath Chaudhuri to tell us about Chandravati of Bengal, whose life was a tragic drama and yet she found fulfilment in worshipping Shiva and writing her version of the Ramayana. In the words of Dr Chaudhuri: 'If heroism lies in withstanding human pain and suffering through human strengths and the capacity of overcoming them, then this epic is surely a fitting one and Sita emanates just such a strength. It does not contain epical wars fought through magnificent weapons, rather the only weapons Sita uses here are moral ones.'

Andal, Janabai, Bahinabai, Mira, Vengamamba, Gangasati: all of them so many flames of spirituality. How they have suffered, struggled, and succeeded in opening the eyes of materialist men! Of all the essays,

the most disappointing is 'Andal: the Ruler of all Hearts'. The language is imprecise and unnecessary pontification eats up space. The essayist betrays her ignorance of ancient Tamil ethos when she says: 'It is normal to that socio-cultural backdrop that regarded women as men's equals in every sphere of life.' Actually, the ancient Tamil woman was a second-class citizen. When the husband was alive, he usually had affairs with courtesans—a man's going to the 'Parathai' was a common sight and perhaps a symbol of status—and neglected his wife; when he died, she was subject to the indignities of widowhood. The rather inviting subtitle 'the awe-inspiring journey of Andal's life' fails to produce any information about Andal! We are told that Andal was born in 'Srivilliputtur, near Srirangam.' Of course, if the distance were compared with that to Afghanistan, Srirangam would qualify as being 'near' Andal's birthplace. Referring to Periyalvar's work as 'sentimental' and calling Lord Ranganatha 'the ultimate male' is laughable. Katyayani Vrata is referred as a Vedic vow, but it is not! And when the essayist says Andal was known as 'Tiruppavai Jeeyar', our disillusionment is complete. It was Ramanujacharya and not Andal who was known as Tiruppavai Jeeyar. The reading list betrays the author's lack of familiarity with the world of Andal scholarship.

In any ambitious undertaking of this sort, a couple of failures should not blind us to the solid work done, the planning and the execution of a volume which is of great value to the growing library on the bhakti movement. *The Voice of Women* is sure to go in for a second edition at an early date, for it proves once again that motherhood is holy, woman is holy; and as in many other spheres, including farming, woman shows the way for humankind to arrive at unity through a mystic at-one-ment with the Supreme.

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Devi Mahatmyam

Trans. N Hariharan

Adi Sankara Advaita Research Centre,
64 V R Ramanathan Salai, Chetput,
Chennai 600 031. E-mail: vedantin35@rediffmail.com. 2008. xviii + 201 pp. Rs 120.

This English rendition of *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashati*,

which belongs to the *Markandeya Purana*, is—as has been pointed out in the preface—N Hariharan's 'humble attempt' to present the epic poem in 'readable English' to stimulate devotion to the Divine Mother. The author is an ardent devotee of Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna, and Sri Ramana Maharshi and a popular author of books and articles on spiritual themes.

All the thirteen chapters of the original Sanskrit text have been presented with English translations on facing pages to facilitate comparison of textual material and ease of reading and comprehension. The text begins with the poignant story of King Suratha who, having been defeated by his enemies in war and finding his ministers and subjects treacherous and greedy in times of need, goes to the forest and happens to meet Samadhi, a vaishya, who narrates a similar tale of woe to the king. They approach Rishi Medha and ask him why they felt attached to the very persons who had harmed them. The sage solves their dilemma by imparting them the 'Devi Mahatmya' and instructs them to worship the Devi who is capable of granting the twin blessings of worldly prosperity, *abhyudaya*, and spiritual awakening, *nihsreyasa*.

The translation is preceded by an illuminating prologue which outlines the contents of the thirteen chapters while highlighting the spiritual significance of this holy text. In an impressive epilogue the learned author expounds the four dimensions of this religious classic—fictional, devotional, practical, and spiritual—which reveal the symbolic significance of different characters, human and divine, of this esoteric treatise based on etymological analyses of their names and the events associated with them.

Hariharan's translation of this esoteric poem in easy English reveals his conceptual clarity and devotional fervour. It will not only be of great utility to those interested in Shaktism and Srividya but also serve as a source of inspiration to all spiritual aspirants in their quest for Self-realization. Let us praise the Devi with Hariharan: 'Thou art the Primal Cause of the entire universe. Though possessed of the triad of *gunas* (of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), Thou art not tainted by them. Thy range is beyond the ken of even Hari, Hara, and others. Thou art the sanctuary of all. This entire universe is a fraction of Thee. Thou art the unmanifest *Prakriti*, primeval and supreme.'

Prof. V V S Saibaba

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REPORTS

News from Branch Centres

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, consecrated the new shrine room at **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur**, on 7 December 2008.

On 9 December Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the first floor of the devotees' dining-hall at **Ramakrishna Math, Lucknow**. On 12 December he also inaugurated a 28-bed orthopaedic ward at **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Lucknow**.

The dispensary and library buildings of **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Memorial, Porbandar**, were inaugurated on 14 December by Sri Nawal Kishore Sharma, Governor of Gujarat, and Swami Gautamananda respectively.

On 14 December **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, organized an all-Tripura devotees' conference, which was attended by 642 delegates. And on 20 December Swami Prabhanandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, dedicated a 9-foot bronze statue of Swami Vivekananda at the centre's school.

The year-long centenary celebrations of **Ramakrishna Math, Nattarampalli**, concluded on 23 December with a public meeting, cultural programmes, and the release of a commemorative volume. Among the various programmes the centre organized 25 free medical camps in nearby villages and distributed 13,000 dictionaries to poor students in rural areas.

As part of its silver jubilee celebrations **Rama-**



Viveka Prabha: tenth anniversary celebrations

krishna Math, Pune, organized a two-day all-Maharashtra devotees' convention, which was inaugurated by Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj on 20 December. Further, a youth convention, addressed by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, former President of India, and several other dignitaries, was organized on 14 and 15 January 2009.

On 1 January *Viveka Prabha*, the monthly organ of the Ramakrishna Order in Kannada issued from **Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore**, celebrated its tenth anniversary. The journal has a circulation of more than 20,000 copies and a readership of 100,000 persons. On the occasion, a function was organized in the ashrama's auditorium, which included a seminar on Media and Spirituality and the release of a special issue called 'Bhavasagara Sri Ramakrishna'. Several scholars, monks, devotees, and well-wishers attended the function.

The newly built hostel building, Vivekananda Vidyarthi Bhavan, at **Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur**, was inaugurated on 3 January. The three-day function organized in this connection was attended by many monks and about 1,000 devotees.

On 12 January Sri Nawal Kishore Sharma, Governor of Gujarat, unveiled a 7½-foot statue of Swami Vivekananda at **Ramakrishna Mission, Vadodara**, and also inaugurated the Vivek Rath project aimed at propagating higher values in and around the city through a mobile audio-visual unit.

On 12 January Sri Lal Krishna Advani, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and former Deputy Prime Minister of India, unveiled a 9½-foot statue of Swami Vivekananda installed at Sri Ramakrishna Square, Basavanagudi, Bangalore, on the



Unveiling of Swami Vivekananda statue in Bangalore

initiative of **Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore**. Sri Advani, Sri Rameshwar Thakur, Governor of Karnataka, Sri B S Yeddyurappa and Sri SM Krishna, present and former chief ministers of Karnataka, and several other personages addressed the public meeting organized on this occasion.

Ramakrishna Math, Madurai, conducted an essay competition for students of the city and nearby places on 12 January, with a total participation of 23,577 students.

On January 19 and 20 **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Chennai**, conducted a voluntary blood donation camp among its students.



1,051 students offered their blood after undergoing due medical checkup by doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff from: Voluntary

Health Service, Red Cross, Kasturibai Hospital, Government General Hospital, Stanley Government Hospital, Government Royapettah Hospital, and Children's Hospital.

Relief

Flood Relief · In January 2009 the following centres distributed several items to flood-affected people. **Belgharia**: 6,186 saris, 6,261 dhotis, 6,308 blankets, and 1,297 utensils to 6,308 families belonging to 5 villages of Bhagabanpur and Patashpur blocks

in Purba Medinipur district. **Chennai Math**: 10,000 kg rice, 1,000 blankets, 1,000 mats, 1,000 saris, 1,000 dhotis, 3,000 children's garments, 1,000 bags, and 1,000 towels to 1,000 families of 24 villages in Thanjavur and Tiruvarur districts. **Lucknow**: 1,003 blankets to several families of Etaunja Nagar Panchayat in Lucknow district.


Winter Relief · 16,194 blankets were distributed to needy people, affected by the severity of the winter, in the respective areas of the following centres. **Agartala**: 200; **Almora**: 266; **Baghbazar**: 720; **Bankura**: 833; **Baranagar Mission**: 3,000; **Belgharia**: 60; **Barasat**: 600; **Chandipur**: 1,500; **Deoghar**: 2,000; **Dinajpur** (Bangladesh): 290; **Gol Park**: 600; **Malda**: 625; **Medinipur**: 300; **Muzaffarpur**: 500; **Purulia**: 1,000; **Rahara**: 700; **Saradapitha**: 500; **Tamluk**: 1,000; **Vrindaban**: 1,500. Besides, the following centres distributed various winter garments to the needy. **Almora**: 72 woollen garments; **Baranagar Mission**: 199 chadars; **Deoghar**: 82 sweaters; **Malda**: 250 sweaters and 150 shawls; **Vrindaban**: 1,500 pairs of socks to widows.

Distress Rehabilitation · The following centres distributed various items to needy people. **Baranagar Mission**: 553 saris, 150 dhotis, 100 lungis, 935 sets of pants and shirts, 210 frocks, 100 churidars, 200 vests, 500 notebooks, and other items. **Belgharia**: 60 saris and 60 dhotis in Jalangi block, Murshidabad district. **Dinajpur**: 730 saris and 450 kg rice. **Medinipur**: 70 saris and 20 dhotis. **Rahara**: 225 mosquito-nets, 188 saris, and 11 assorted garments. Besides, **Mysore Ashrama** built 117 low-cost houses for economically backward people of Tenkanamole village in Chamarajanagara district, Karnataka.

Economic Rehabilitation · Under self-employment programme, two centres provided needy people in their respective areas with the following items: **Cooch Behar**: 5 rickshaws; **Dinajpur**: 15 vans, 7 rickshaws, and 2 sewing machines.

Pilgrimage Service · As in previous years, **Seva Pratishthan** organized a round-the-clock medical relief camp during the Makara Sankranti Mela at Sagar Island in South 24-Parganas district, from 10 to 15 January. A total of 4,201 patients were treated, out of which 32 received indoor medical care. Besides, 135 blankets and 150 pieces of clothing were distributed to needy pilgrims and monks. **Manasadwip** centre arranged board and lodging facilities for 700 pilgrims at residential camps in the mela area and the ashrama.

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